

成田良悟

Ryohgo Narita

ヴァンパイア



電撃文庫

ヴぁんぷ!

成田良悟が描く“この世でいちばん吸血鬼らしくない吸血鬼”の物語。

【親愛なる日本の紳士淑女諸君！ 月並な問い事で申し訳ないが——諸君は吸血鬼の存在を信じるかね？】

【——失敬、名乗るのが遅れたようだ。我が名はゲルハルト・フォン・バルシュタイン！ このグローワース島を預かる、子爵の称号を賜りし吸血鬼！ 自己紹介代わりに、我が島で起こった一つの騒動について話をしようではないか！ ……まあ語らせてくれたまえ。暇なのだ】

【君が私の話を信じるも信じぬも、私が人にあらざる存在という事は一目瞭然であろう？ 何しろ私の身体は——】



[Ladies and gentlemen! I am truly ashamed to ask so banal a question, but do you believe in the existence of vampires?]

[Ah, my humblest apologies. Perhaps I should have begun with an introduction. I am Gerhardt von Waldstein, a vampire upon whom was bestowed the noble title of 'viscount' and lordship over the island of Growerth. But let us prolong these formalities no more. Allow me to instead relay to you the tale of a certain commotion that took place on this island. Please, I implore you to lend me your ears, that I may stave off my boredom.]

[And whether or not you believe in my existence, my inhumanity is clear as day, is it not? After all, this body of mine—]



ヴァンパイア Vamp だぶ!

成田良悟

Ryohgo Narita

イラスト●エナミカツミ

Illustration : Katsumi Enami

Vamp! I
Written by Narita Ryohgo
Illustrated by Enami Katsumi



「ブあんぷ」口絵／2004年5月

[Who am I, you ask?]

[So, in an attempt to understand what in the world I may be, and in order to confirm your suspicions about what kind of a creature I am, you have taken it upon yourself to ask me in person!]

[Then allow me to answer your question with utmost sincerity! My name is Gerhardt von Waldstein. I was granted the noble title of 'viscount' and bestowed lordship over the island of Growerth by His Imperial Majesty the Emperor.]

[Let me begin by introducing to you my family. Ah, they say that one glance at a child will tell you a thousand things about the parent, do they not?]

[Let us start with Relic—my adopted son, and one who could not be any closer to pureblood status. A pure-blooded *what*, you ask? Now, what was it that you called those like myself and my son? Masters of the Night, Nosferatu, Night Flyer, et cetera... Ah, of course! I've left out the most recognizable of our names.]

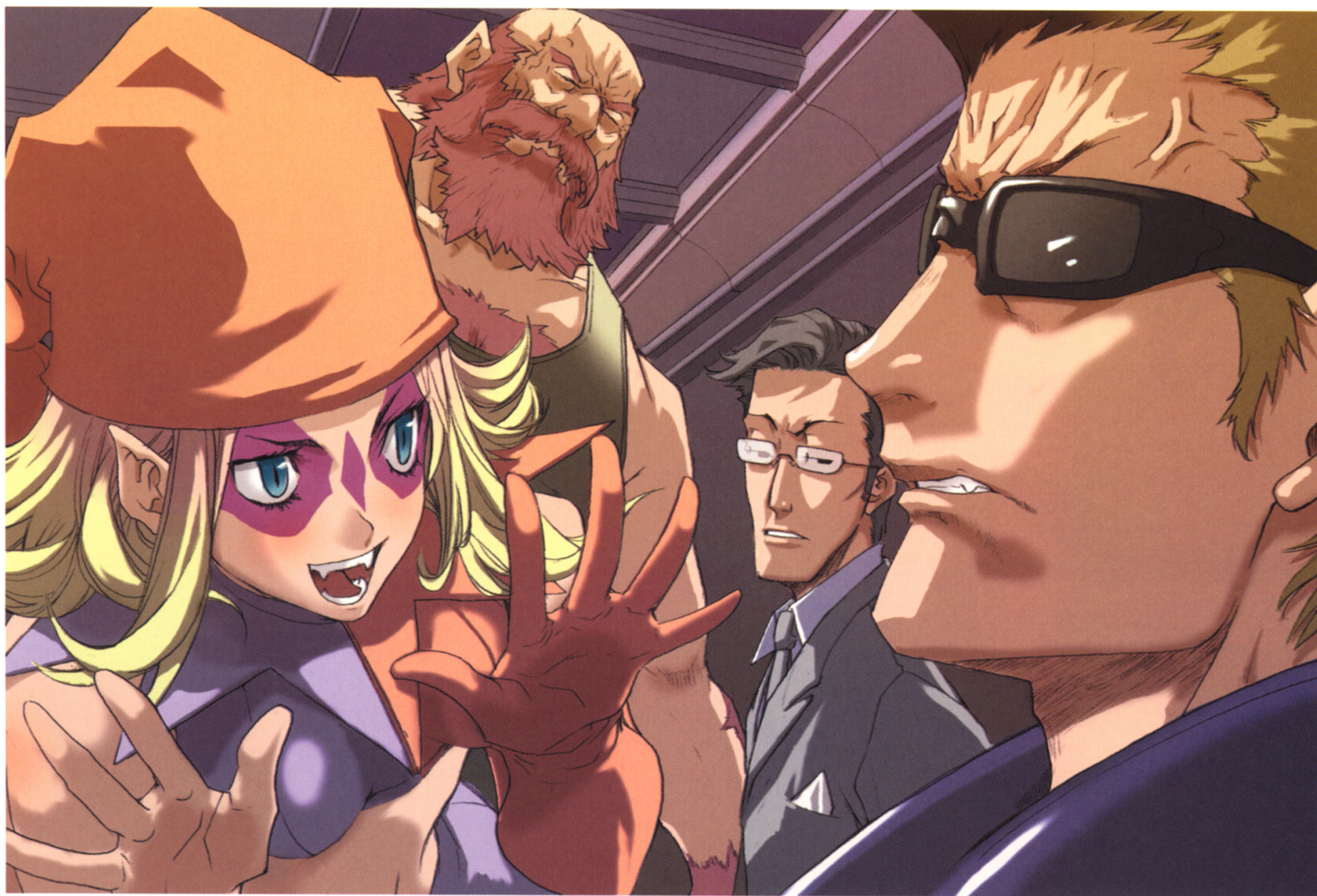
[Perhaps it would be most accurate to call us 'Vampires'.]

[How do you feel about these beings known as vampires? Fear? Hatred? Or perhaps a sense of curiosity or reverence you might reserve for creatures of legend. But if you expect such mythical exploits of my son, I'm afraid you will be rather disappointed. After all, Relic is much too gentle a boy to be anything but himself.]

[My daughter Ferret is Relic's younger sister and twin. I do not mean to boast, but she has grown into quite the beauty. But recently she's become rather strangely proud—or stubborn, perhaps I should say. Of course, it is not vanity I speak of, but her pride in her family and nature as a vampire. In fact, I doubt even she is aware of her own beauty yet, but perhaps I would come across as too doting a father if I claimed that that is one of the many things that endear her to me so.]

[What I am trying to say is, I can boast proudly about my children—which, at the same time, means that I am boasting proudly about their father, myself, in a very roundabout fashion. Your praises, I beseech you!]

[...That was a joke. I would like to claim that I am not so low as to use my beloved children in order to honor myself.]



「ヴァンパイア」口絵／2004年5月

[I say that I am Lord of this island, but it has been a long time indeed since aristocrats have had any power in this country. In other words, the human side of this island is under the jurisdiction of someone other than myself.]


[The man's name is Watt Stalf. Never mind the circumstances, but he is a powerful figure on this island—and a man who considers me his worst enemy.]

[He is a man who has a sincerely optimistic outlook on his own ambitions. Others born of a union between the opposing worlds of Night and Day might bemoan their circumstances and believe themselves to be neither here nor there. But this man used his double heritage to his advantage—during the day, as a clever human using his wits. And during the night, violently going about working all kinds of wrongdoing as a man of vampiric descent.]

[...I suppose 'wrongdoing' is not necessarily the correct word to use. After all, this man is not swayed by good or evil, acting only as his desires propel him.]

[That is why his actions sometimes look rather mindless, and his plans shoddy and haphazard. Even if his plan were to be carried ninety percent of the way to perfection, he is the kind of man who would abandon it without a second thought if it didn't achieve his desired outcome. And even in this incident I am about to disclose to you, he behaved in extremely irrational ways—all for the sake of handing me humiliation. Although I suppose those who are caught up in his whims might be terribly inconvenienced, I am personally quite fond of this man's pettiness. In fact, I would even go so far as to say I respect this about him.]

[This petty villain is the kind of man who grows and matures. He is a match for most heroes in his will to see through everything he does to the end, but he could never become anyone so great as them. And that is why I believe his followers have a soft spot for him, deep down in their hearts—fondness for this most noble of petty villains, the man who will never give up on his ideals.]



「食事と言うのは、人生の縮図であると思うのだよ、好むメニュー、作法、あるいは食後の談笑にいたるまで、その二つに何らかの信念が宿つていると言つても良い。—— そうだな、私は先日、その中でも特に「食」に執念を燃やすレディと出会ったよ」

「彼女の名は—— 木島閑音」

「どう説明したら良いものかね、彼女はある種の食事に関しては、並々ならぬ決意を持つて臨んでいる。それはそうだろう、何しろ食材一つ調達するのにも命がけなのだから、彼女は狩人であり、自身自身の為だけに腕を振るう料理人でもあり、より上質の食材を求める美食家でもある」

「ふむ？ 諸君も彼女と同じ物が食べてみたいと言うのかね？ 私には君達の願いを止める権利は無いが、忠告はさせて貰うよ。それを食すという事は、金や味覚ではなく—— まさしく、後の人生をかける事になるのだから、何しろ、彼女の追い求める食材と言うのは——」

[It would not be an exaggeration to say that dinner is a microcosm of life itself. Your favorite foods, your table manners, and even the conversation in which you engage at the table say something about your beliefs. And speaking of which, I've recently encountered a young lady who was particularly passionate about the art of eating.]

[Her name is Shizune Kijima.]

[How to explain, now? She partakes in certain kinds of food with uncommon drive. After all, she must stake her life on the procuring of her every meal. She is at once a self-serving hunter, a culinary artist, and a gourmet.]

[Hm? You say you wish to try her menu as well, my friends? Though I have no right to stop you, I must warn you; to eat as she does is not a matter of putting your money or tastebuds on the line—it is a way of life that will haunt you for the rest of your days. The raw ingredients she seeks are—]



「ヴぁんぷ!」口絵／2004年5月

[Am I a self-aware being, you ask? But of course! In the end, we are creatures beyond the logic of humanity. His Imperial Majesty had a rather cutting sense of humor, bestowing a title that does not exist in his country to myself, a creature that should not exist. Is it not pure serendipity? Of course, I hold my title of viscount with pride, as I do with my identity.]

[I protect this island with a noble title that should not exist, yet at the same time, I receive help from the people of this land.]

[To show you an example, do you see those two over there? That energetic boy on the right is Michael¹, and next to him is his younger sister Hilda.]

[Those two are excellent friends of my children—or, I suppose Relic and Hilda are as good as lovers. And as for Ferret and Michael... Let us say for now that they have a powerful bond of their own. Ah, though I find it rather simple to acknowledge my son's romantic affairs, it is rather difficult to do the same for my daughter.]

[I do not mean that I have anything against Michael. In fact, I could never thank those siblings enough for brightening up my children. Their joy compels my children to smile, which in turn brings me pure bliss.]

[These siblings are the kind of people for whom I live. After all, their happiness gives me happiness. Which came first, the chicken or the egg? Does it really matter if both are delicious in their own ways?]

[Hm? You say you're through with introductions, my friends? You wish to see me in person? Hah, it seems you have not yet noticed. I have already shown you my true form some time ago, dear friends! All this time. Yes, right before your eyes. After all, I—]

¹ Pronounced 'Mihail'.

プロローグ 9

1章 棺の回りの狩人達 55

2章 棺の回りの吸血鬼 113

3章 棺に満ちる紅色紳士 239

エピローグ 棺の中の十人十色 301

Design by Yoshiniko Kamabe

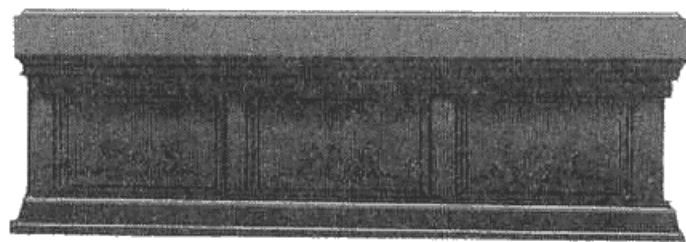


The clouds hung low in the sky, looking as though prepared to drag away the children walking down the streets. With a great red eye they looked down upon the earth, discussing which one of the children they should steal away.

With a cough, they scattered snow over the streets.

In the end, that is what Devils are—so said God.

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Prologue 1: The Boy and the Girl Before the Coffin

Drip drip they drop

A rain of blood falling *drip drip plop*

May 2003. The chapel of Waldstein Castle, on the Island of Growerth, Germany.

"Viscount Waldstein, sir?"

It was a word that could not exist in this country.

With the Proclamation of the Weimar Republic in 1919, the nobility had lost all their power and privilege. But setting even that matter aside, the title of 'viscount' did not exist in this country to begin with. Instead of the title of 'viscount', the Germans used words like 'Wildgrave', 'Palsgrave', 'Burgrave', 'Markgrave', or 'Raugrave' to indicate all sorts of positions between the ranks of 'baron' and 'count'.

And in an ancient castle in the country that bore this history, the foreign word was repeated once more.

"Viscount Waldstein, please tell us."

In the majestic chapel, two children stood before the altar. They were children by legality, but physically they were teenagers—both around fifteen years of age.

As the boy looked on nervously, the girl continued to address the great container before them with the word that could not exist.

"Viscount Waldstein, when are Relic and Ferret going to return to this island?"

Although her tone in addressing an aristocrat was somewhat lacking in refinement, the girl's voice showed unmistakable respect. This courtesy was not borne of any sort of class differences—it was a sense of respect forged by a bond of trust.

In front of the girl, however, was nothing but a still white coffin and the altar before it.

A ray of sunlight hit the coffin through the skylight. The children narrowed their eyes as the light reflected off the white surface and into their eyes.

No voice answered the girl's question. The chapel was enveloped in silence.

"I see... So you don't know, then... But they *will* come back one day. Right, sir?"

The girl continued her seemingly one-sided conversation. The boy next to her also watched the coffin fixedly, as though there was nothing strange about the girl's discussion.

"I'm glad to hear that. I was so scared that I'd never see them again..." The girl said, replying to a silent answer once more. The boy, who was about a year or two older than the girl, suddenly spoke up excitedly.

"Uh, sir! Um, well, uh... Once Ferret comes back, you see, I, uh... Would you allow Ferret—I mean, your daughter—to go out with—"

Splash.

There was something like the sound of water. At that very moment, the boy fell to the chapel floor as though he had been thrown by an invisible force. He flew in a graceful arc and fell to the floor.

"Sir!" The girl cried to the coffin, and worriedly looked back at her brother.

"D-don't worry, Hilda. This is between me and the viscount." The boy said, gently pushing back his sister and getting to his feet. He stepped towards the coffin once more.

He then stared at a point in front of his eyes, just like his sister had done earlier, and suddenly spoke up again.

"Yes, sir! I know this is supposed to be between me and her! But they say that if you want to shoot the general, first you have to shoot the horse—I, uh, don't mean to imply that you're a horse, sir! Anyway, what I'm trying to say is, would you allow me and Ferret to—huh? Don't call her by name without permission? ...Uh, sir! You see, I'm just practicing for our future together. What? You can't give your daughter to someone like me?! Sir, you're supposed to be her parent! Loving and understanding! You can't just close off her future like—N-no, sir! Uh, what do you mean, do I think I have the right to speak to you this way?"

The boy rambled on incoherently, gesticulating as though in a one-man show. From a distance it was a surreal sight, but the girl named Hilda only watched with a smile on her face.

"I know, I know! No, sir. This isn't about chivalry or anything like that! As a man, I want to protect my lady in body and soul! ...Huh? What do you mean, you'll have to test my resolve? I couldn't defeat you, sir! W-wait! I'm not ready yeeeeeeeeeeeeeee—"

There was a splash of red.

Blood gushed forth into the air, filling the chapel in a fine mist.

The girl watched as her brother fell into a pool of blood, the smile never leaving her face. She looked as though the terrible scene before her was little more than an innocent puppet show.

The coffin in the chapel was bathed in sunlight.

The pristine white coffin was instantly stained by a crimson splash of blood.

Under the gaze of sacred statues, blood dripped from the edge of the coffin, drop after drop.

Drip drip plop

Drip

Drip



Prologue 2: The Boy and the Girl Inside the Coffin

A splish splash of red

A splish splash of blood

April 2004. Somewhere in Yokohama, Japan.

Let me tell you about my family.

Huh? No, it's just the stars. Looking up at the stars at night by the sea just reminded me of home. It's a little island somewhere between Britain and Germany, and the night sky there is nothing short of dazzling.

What about during the day?

I couldn't really tell you. I've never seen the sky during the daytime.

Come on, you already knew that, didn't you? No, I'm not mad at you.

Right. My family, huh?

I'm not gonna give you a huge history lesson on our family tree or anything. I guess there's only really three people in our family, anyway.

I have a little sister—we're twins, by the way. She has to treat me like the older brother because I was born just a few minutes earlier. Don't get me wrong, but I'm glad I'm older than her. You see, my sister's always so true to herself that someone has to keep her in line all the time.

She has her faults—she's proud, and she looks down on humans—but I think that's her way of defending herself. So I'll understand if you get angry at her. But please don't hate her for it.

A noble title and a special bloodline are about all we have to our name. My sister always tries to build a wall around herself because she's so conscious of the fact that she's *different*. Always telling herself 'I am an aristocrat'. I guess it's nice that she's always polite, but I don't know how much more of her 'Honored Brother's I can take.

Then again, I guess I'm in the same boat. Yeah. It bothers me, too. I feel like I'm being crushed by all the pressure. And if my sister's going through the exact same thing as me, then maybe the fact that she never lets it show means that she's really strong.

And as for Father... Huh? That's right. My birth mother passed away. Our real parents were murdered before the two of us were old enough to know anything. The father that adopted us avenged our parents' deaths and took us in as his own—though I don't know how he was related to our real parents.

Father? He's a gentleman among gentlemen.

That's the best I can do with my vocabulary.

I'm not saying he's a decadent aristocrat or anything like that. Well, I guess he *can* be a bit extreme. But, uh... He's polite, for a start, and he's classy. He might act a bit dramatic, kind of like a gentleman in a top hat from those comedies, but... it's hard to say. I'm trying to say that I respect this gentleman... That's right. I respect him.

It's different from the way I respect him as my father. I also respect him as a man. Whenever I talk to Father, I feel at ease. It almost feels like I can just shrug off the pressure that's suffocating me.

Father and my sister are polar opposites, but I love them more than anything in this world.

That's right. I don't even need to think about it. Because I really am telling the truth.

And... uh, right. So, what I wanted to say is...

I treasure my family. And even though I feel like I'm being crushed under that weight, I don't resent my circumstances. Sometimes it makes me a little sad, but I think I have to accept my fate.

So what makes me sad?

Well, something like what's happening now, for one.

My blood is boiling. I can't control it.

You know, when you're in love with someone... you just want to hold them, right?

...Oh, you finally figured out what I was trying to say.

Then I'm going to make this clear. There's two things I want to tell you.

First, I... I think you're really beautiful.

And second... I'd like to... well, I'd like to suck your blood.

Don't worry. I'll be gentle.

†

Night.

"Rejected again, Honored Brother?"

Shut up. It's none of your business.

"Did your guest not accept your invitation with full knowledge that you are a vampire? And yet she had the gall to turn you away at the moment of truth!"

Don't make that face. You're scaring me. And besides, I still look too young to seriously seduce a woman.

And I admit I messed up there, too. When I said I'd be gentle, I was just trying to lighten the mood.

"Is that not a peculiar thing to say?"

You're still a bit... lacking when it comes to things like this. But then again, I guess my face wouldn't still be intact if you weren't.

"Me? Do violence upon Honored Brother? Certainly not."

...Sometimes you really scare me, acting like that. I'm fine now, though.

It's almost dawn. I'm going to bed now.

"Please do not change the subject."

All right. What were we talking about, again?

"That human woman you so graciously invited. How could she turn away the aristocrat Relic von Waldstein, a master of the night? Even if you did not want to kill her, it would have done just as well to make eye contact and hypnotize her, or drink her blood by force."

That kind of stuff is up to me, you know. And please stop calling me an aristocrat or that 'night master' thing. Sure, you see that in novels and stuff, but frankly, it's really embarrassing.

"Honored Brother, you really must try to behave in a more refined fashion than those plebeian creatures—"

And one more thing! I know I've been telling you *every single day* for the past three years, but could you please cut that out? Stop acting so formal. We're *family*.

"It is *because* we are family that these formalities are necessary. Honored Brother, you are my only blood relative. You... are the only one in this world to whom I can truly give my sincerest respects."

I just said, please stop going on about the world and blood and family and all that. That's what *humans* do. Those 'plebeian creatures' you look down on so much.

"By that logic, we also share a common tongue and a heart that can feel emotion! Please, Honored Brother. Do not try to change the subject with irrelevant arguments!"

Tch... I was sure I could get you with that one.

Besides, we have Father, too.

"In the end, even Father does not share our blood!"

Ferret. Don't make me get angry.

"Um... Yes, Father's someone I can really respect, but..."

Haha! There you go. You should talk like that more often.

"...! I-I have merely been caught off-guard. I will speak no more!"

Don't get angry, Ferret. I'm just glad you weren't badmouthing Father.

"..."

Father, huh. I can't believe it's already been a year since we left home.

Maybe I should get back soon. I'd really like to see Father again. What about you, Ferret?

"I shall do as you wish, Honored Brother."

Then just be yourself. That's my wish.

Prologue 3: The Rabble Around the Coffin

Squelch squelch goes the blood

From shadows to darkness, *squelch squelch*

April 2004. A bedroom in Waldstein Castle, on the Island of Growerth, Germany.

"Serves you right." Drawled a tall young man, who was looking up at the lavishly ornamented ceiling.

The ceiling was far from the only part of the room that was so ornately decorated. The entire chamber was filled with majesty, as though it had been lifted straight from a museum. The harmonious placement of paintings amidst the luxurious furniture eradicated all hints of vulgar decadence. There was also no light in the room, the darkness lit only by the faint glowing of the stars.

With the moonlight at his back, the young man raised his arms into the air dramatically.

"Ah, I shall say, I shall say—though you may criticize my words with claims of triteness, I shall say—*Fuck your face, you son of a bitch.*"

Though it was the dead of night, the man's eyes bulged from behind a pair of sunglasses. He wore a shirt with a skull emblazoned on it, and a pair of black jeans. Over his shoulders was a black leather jacket. And before the man, who stood stifling his laughter, was a plain white coffin. There was nothing upon its surface save for the words 'Gerhardt von Waldstein' engraved in red.

"You don't live up to even an iota of that ostentatious name. That crazy age of yours is just a number, you hear me?!" The young man roared, stomping on the lid of the coffin.

And as if to respond to him, a figure popped out from the shadows.

"Tee hee! But Master Watt, you just made it so that he couldn't hear!"

The newcomer was a girl about fifteen years of age, dressed like a jester. There was a distinctive pattern painted over her eyes and nose, but the lower half of her face was bare. The red Santa-esque hat she wore also made her look younger than she actually was.

"Oy, Clown."

"Yes? Yes?"

The moment the jester leaned in closer, the man's fist rammed into her face, painting over her makeup with a coat of red.

"Guh!"

"Shut your trap."

Pulling his hand out of the jester's face, the young man called Watt shook her blood off his hand. The blood scattered all over the floor, but left no stain on the red carpet.

And without even bothering to wipe his hand, Watt put a foot on the coffin once more.

There was something strange about the coffin—some sort of resin had been applied to the space between the base and the lid, sealing off all openings.

"We've known each other for a damn long time, but looks like it all ends today. Eh, Count?"

There was a sneer plastered on Watt's face. The jester, her forehead still spewing blood, burst into laughter.

"Ahahahaha! Master Watt, that's another mistake! Gerhardt is a viscount!"

"Tell me something I don't know."

Watt drove his hand into the jester's face once more, this time without even turning around.

"Urgh..."

The force of the attack overcame her vocal cords, preventing her from screaming. The jester fell to the floor dramatically.

"Ohhh... That really hurt, Master Watt..."

The jester squeezed out a distorted voice from her bleeding throat, rolling on the carpet in pain. And yet Watt kept his eyes focused on the coffin, repeatedly stomping down on the white lid.

"'Count' is more than good enough for fucking vampire aristocrats." He said, his mouth twisting into a grin. A set of unusually long canines glinted in the dim light.

And as though that served as a signal, the number of presences in the room instantly increased. Multiple sets of feet stood upon the red carpet, the jester managing to continue her rolling between them.

"Mr. Stalf. It will be sunrise in approximately three hours." One of the newcomers said, his tone making clear his respect. However, this was the kind of deference reserved for an employer, as opposed to a master. Suffice to say, it clashed greatly with the regal atmosphere of the chamber.

The man who had just addressed Watt was wearing a grey suit. His appearance was just as contradictory to Watt and the jester as his tone was to the setting. Not only that, the other newcomers were all visibly eccentric characters of their own. There was no hint of unity to the group's appearance.

"I'm afraid tardiness will not look so favorable on your records, Mr. Stalf."

"Fuck those officers. It's not like they even keep proper records anyway. You still can't shake acting like a Japanese salaryman, Magic Man?"

The man, who had been addressed by the monicker of 'Magic Man' as opposed to his real name, looked at Watt awkwardly.

"I am of the opinion that the lack of numerical scoring is precisely why we must strive to please our superiors."

"Zip it before I go all amateur magician on you and vanish your torso." Watt said, still not looking back. The Magic Man flinched.

In appearance, the Magic Man was a plain-looking man of Asian descent. His expressionless face made it difficult to judge his exact age.

And as if ridiculing the silent Asian, the figures standing around the room stirred. Of them, a particularly large shadow stepped over to Watt, blocking the window.

"Scuse me."

Surprised by the sudden cutoff of light, Watt turned around towards the window.

"What'm I s'pposed to do?"

The man speaking to him was large. A veritable giant whose head nearly reached the ceiling.

"...? ...?! ...Huh?! Wh-who the hell are you?!" Watt cried. The Magic Man stepped in to explain.

"Mr. Stalf, this would be the newcomer who's just been placed with us todaaaaaaargh?!"

"And. Why. Did. I. Not. Hear. About. This?"

As though to mask his surprise, Watt kicked the Magic Man in the shin as hard as he could.

"B-but Mr. Stalf! You're the one who told me to hold the introductions for later!"

With tears in his eyes from the overwhelming pain, the Magic Man hobbled over to the door and slowly reached over to the modern light switch beside it. He flicked it on.

With a *click*, the chandelier came to life and brightened up the pitch-black room as though it was midday. The eerie atmosphere dissipated, leaving behind what looked and felt like a luxurious hotel suite. The figures standing in the room winced at the sudden burst of light.

"Well, Mr. Stalf. The newcomer here is called—oof!"

Watt's boot smashed right into the man's mouth. The hapless Magic Man was thrown to the wall. Watt followed up by stomping on the man's face with his heel over and over again.

"Who told you you could turn on the lights? Die, shit-for-brains! You just *had* to go and ruin the mood, didn't you? I could have basked in my glory a little longer, you son of a bitch! Die, shit-for-brains!"

Watt continued to kick at the Magic Man's face, his pace reminiscent of an automatic weapon. Suddenly, the jester, who seemed to have recovered fully, grinned and butted in.

"Oh, Master Watt! You just said 'Die, shit-for-brains' twice! That's terrible! Your vocabulary, I mean!"

Though Watt was standing on one leg, he expertly pivoted around his foot and landed a heel drop on the girl's head.

"...!"

The jester began floundering, blood spouting from her forehead and neck.

The man responsible for the bloodbath took a step away from his victims and approached the giant, whose full form was not visible in the light.

The giant's face was covered in a thick beard. His form was large and bloated, though it was impossible to tell if it was fat or muscle that lined his body. Of all the unusual figures in the room, he was the most out of place under the elegant chandelier.

"You're m'boss, righ'? Nice t'meet you." He said slowly. Watt raised an eyebrow.

"...You're fucking huge. You just a plain old monster-born? How'd you manage to *hide* this long?"

"Well, see..."

Before the large man could even finish, his body began deflating like a balloon, revealing the form of a little boy about ten years of age. The surprising newcomer was dressed in expensive clothing, a far cry from the raggedly-dressed giant who had been standing there only moments ago.

"I have no trouble blending into crowded streets in a form like this."

The boy greeted Watt once more, his voice, attitude, and tone having done a 180. Watt took in the new information and narrowed his eyes from beneath his shades.

"You bastard..."

"Or..."

The boy grinned impishly, suddenly changing form once more.

"Maybe this'll be more to your liking, hm?"

With an incredibly seductive voice, the boy's body had been replaced by that of a voluptuous woman. It was like watching a piece of claymation—his body collapsed like a pile of mud, then reformed itself in the blink of an eye. The shape of the skull, the colour of the eyes, the nose, the mouth, and even the clothes on the boy's back.

The other figures, who had been watching everything from the start, responded to the change with cat calls and murmurs. Watt, however, clicked his tongue and hoisted the woman into the air by her neck.

"Huh?" The Giant→Boy→Beauty's eyes widened in shock.

"I see what your game is. I get it now. You could even say I'm floored." Watt glared at the woman and spat anxiously. "...So what the hell do you *actually* look like? A little warning,

here. If you tell me you transformed so much that you forgot your true form, I'll crush you. I don't need any brainless underlings who can't even remember what their own fucking face looks like."

Overwhelmed by Watt's display of immense hatred, the creature in the shape of a woman struggled to point at the window.

Because the room had been lit up by the chandelier, the glass window reflected the interior of the room like a mirror.

Watt compared the appearance of the being in the window and the woman he was holding up, then released her with a nod.

The others all turned towards the window to have a look themselves, but the woman gave her hand a harsh wave. Every single window in the room shattered.

There was no sign that she had so much as touched, or even thrown something at the windows. Normally, onlookers might cry out in confusion at the sight, but the group in the chamber was unfazed.

"So *that's* what you are. That's about it for you, then."

"Um, my name—"

"Now it's my turn to introduce myself."

Ignoring the being who had suddenly transformed back into a boy, Watt smiled and continued.

"The name's Watt. I'm the leader of this team. I doubt I'll ever like you people, so I'll just tell you about what I *don't* tolerate."

He leapt up into the air and landed a sobat square on the boy's chest.

"Ugh!"

The boy was thrown into the wall, getting the wind knocked out of him. The man responsible for this superhuman feat continued as though nothing had happened.

"You know what bugs me? Getting shown up by my own flunkies."

And without even turning to look back at the boy, he stepped over to the coffin once more and stamped his foot onto the lid. He made no effort to hide his hatred of the object, as though they had some sort of a history together.

"Then let me continue. ...Now that I think about it, we've already known each other for—"

As he began his majestic speech at the coffin, Watt suddenly caught wind of a commotion taking place behind him.

"Amazing! Never seen anyone who could transform into everything."

"I mean, half the guys here could turn into bats, but still."

"What about your clothes? Are they actually part of your body?"

"Say, what's your name?"

"I've seen a lot of people like you in American comics!"

"More in Japanese comics these days, right? Manga and anime."

"It's called 'Japanimation'."

"But isn't that just what Japanese people call it?"

"'Animation by Japs', huh? Talk about self-deprecation."

"Shut up, people! You're getting on my nerves!"

"Turn into that hot chick again. Without clothes this time."

"My friends, wait a moment! A naked woman will only serve to disrupt order!"

The other figures in the room crowded around the collapsed boy. Watt put even more weight into the foot he had placed on the coffin and sighed, astonished.

"Why... are all my underlings RETARDS?! What the hell do those officers have against me?!" Watt complained, adjusting his sunglasses. The Magic Man, his face still bloody, spoke up.

"I did say it was important to please one's superiors, did I not?"

"Shut up."

Watt made to lash out at the Magic Man with a kick once again. However—

"It's time. Setting you aside, Mr. Stalf, we can dilly-dally here no longer." Watt had kicked at thin air. The Magic Man was already behind him, whispering into his ear.

"Bastard..."

As Watt ground his teeth, the Magic Man took out a scarf from his pocket. Opening up the dark orange cloth over his face, he calmly recited a spell.

"One, two... three."

On the count of three, he elegantly flicked aside the scarf. The bruises and bloodstains on his face had been wiped clean, replaced by his usual pale and neat complexion.

The moment the magic trick ended, Watt thrust his fist into the Magic Man's stomach. But the punch was caught by the hand that had popped out from the Asian's torso.

Watt, taken by surprise, found that he could no longer move his hand.

"Voila. As you can see, there were no tricks or devices of any sort. Were you surprised?"

The arm did indeed belong to the Magic Man. Watt had not realized that the hand that was not holding the scarf was not in the sleeve where it should have been. The Magic Man had pulled his arm into his shirt while Watt was focused on the scarf.

"I suggest you do not go overboard, Mr. Stalf."

Watt frowned. The Asian man smiled mechanically as though scolding him.

"Yes, you are technically my superior. But in terms of pure vampiric power, you are the weakest among those of us gathered here today. I had been trying to save you face until now, but I'm afraid that time really has come upon us. If you'll excuse me."

Watt struggled to squeeze out a jab at his subordinate, not sensing the slightest bit of helplessness from him.

"Didn't I just tell you... I won't tolerate being shown up by my own underlings?"

"That's exactly why I'm doing this, Mr. Stalf. I'm willing to be slightly underhanded in the pursuit of a positive workplace atmosphere."

A moment later, the Magic Man snapped his fingers and flipped the hem of his jacket. The jacket suddenly grew to several times its size, as though growing into a cape, and disappeared into thin air—taking the Magic Man with it.

With that as a signal, the other figures in the room also disappeared one by one. Some melded into the floor, and others dissipated into the air. And yet others, as though they had never existed.

Instead of watching the room slowly empty, Watt sensed the draining of presence from the room.

Finally, only he and the jester remained in the room—the former standing in silence, the latter rolling around on the floor, wailing.

"Oy, Clown. That's enough."

"Ouchie, it hurts... Huh?"

She stopped in her tracks, looking at Watt curiously. The man did not look back at her, his eyes still fixed on the coffin.

"Cut the act. It's time for you to leave." He said, not letting a hint of emotion rise to his face.

The jester looked truly sad to hear that remark. And as though in obedience, her cut face, her injured forehead and neck, and even the blood flowing from her wounds turned faint like smoke, the reformed. Her wounds were gone. It was not as though she had been healed—it was more like the flesh around her injuries had been dissipated for a moment and reformed in an instant.

"Beat it. You might be pretty good at turning to fog, but even you aren't immune to sunlight."

The jester hesitated, but she soon nodded and disappeared like mist—literally turning her body into fog.

Her form grew faint like a mirage. At that very moment, her pale skin, her colorful makeup, and her gaudy clothing dissolved into a multicolored fog. She soon disappeared into the air.

Only the man and the coffin were left in the room.

The man kicked away at the coffin lid, not allowing a hint of expression to rise to his face.

He kicked at it limply like a sulking child, like a wind-up toy.

Thud. Thud. Again and again.

Thud. Thud. Thud. Thud.

By the time sunlight began filtering in through the window, Watt stopped kicking at the coffin and stretched.

He then looked back at the coffin with a refreshing grin.

"You listenin', Count? 'In terms of pure vampiric power, you are the weakest among those of us gathered here today', that damned Magic Man says. Doesn't it just make you laugh? Well?"

He dramatically spread his arms wide and stepped towards the window.

"Humiliated by my own subordinates, and getting pity from that brat of a clown... Did she seriously think I wouldn't notice? In the end, a brat is all she is. An imbecile. ...Then what the hell am I supposed to be, getting sympathy from someone like her?"

The man stomped down on the shards of the broken window, slowly raising his voice.

"That's right. I'm small fry. I admit that. I'm just a powerless punk. A dog. A minor-leaguer. And a literal half-baked piece of good-for-nothing. You think so too, don't you? But think about it. You just lost to this half-blood."

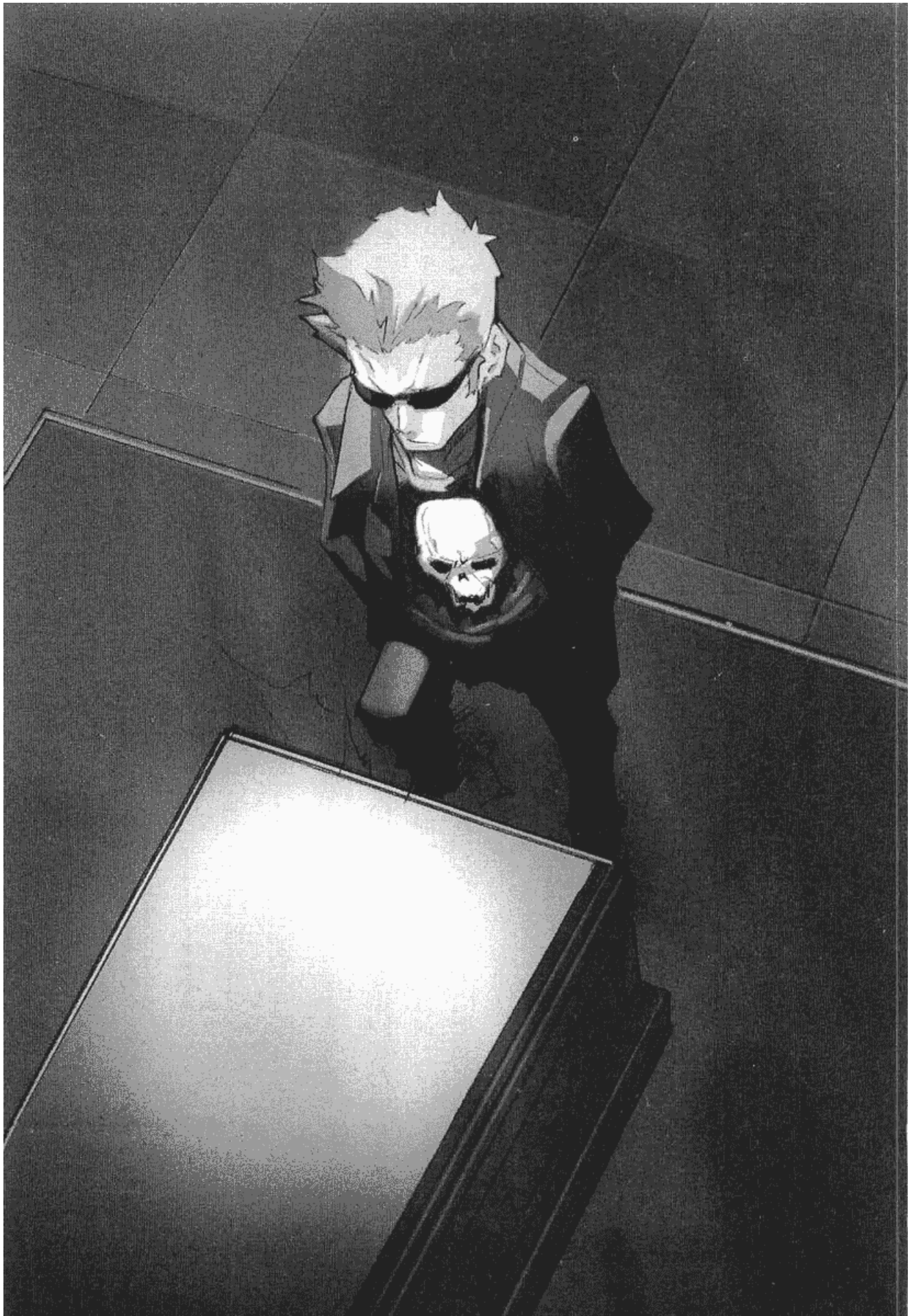
Allowing the light of the morning sun to envelop him fully, Watt twisted his lips into a grin.

"You lose, Count! I don't know how many decades, centuries, or millennia you've lived longer than me, but your excellent vampireness just lost to me! A half-breed dhampyr who's only got half your power and lifespan! You can cry and shake in your boots and call for your mama and blubber like an idiot and that still wouldn't be enough for you. Roll around in a cesspool of humiliation and let me hear you despair and wail. Just keep floundering in that pitch-black coffin *for-fucking-ever!*"

After roaring at the coffin, Watt regained his composure and took a seat on the lid.

"...But let me make this clear, Count. I don't despise my heritage. I'm *thankful* to my parents. My father, the average human, and my mother, the average vampire. And in the end they gave birth to a below-average half-breed, but..."

He trailed off for a moment. Watt then put on an atrocious grin.



"You know, I'm thankful for my own weakness. Because I know how good it feels to crawl up from the pits."

He got up energetically and turned around as though in a dance.

"And once you feel this pleasure, you can't go back. So I'm gonna start climbing from now on, Count. With your defeat as my foothold! The fact that I'm the weakest means that I can enjoy the feeling of my own growing strength more than anyone else! You just sit there and watch me. Watch me struggle and climb like an unsightly weakling! You can stay there and wait for your inevitable pathetic defeat..."

After his long, dramatic claim, Watt added:

"I'm going to keep moving forward. I'll kill those officers, anyone who gets in my way, or looks down on me. I'll slaughter them all—"

And just before he stepped out the door like a normal human, he threw out one final comment.

"And in the end, I'll slaughter your beloved little brats."

Thud.

The sealed coffin shook.

Watt turned back towards it, worry clear in his expression, but the coffin moved no more. The room was enveloped in eerie silence.

Several seconds later, he put on a truly sincere smile and switched on the electric lights.

"So you finally get mad. I'm surprised you're still conscious three hours after you've been sealed inside, but I'm gonna have to thank you. I'm feeling a lot better now. ...No, well, I personally didn't want to go this far. I wanted to take you down like a man, but orders are orders."

Taking advantage of his subordinates' absence, Watt allowed his true face to show.

"I was bluffing just now. As soon as I finish off those officers, the first thing I'll do is get you outta there. *Then* I'll slaughter your brats while you watch."

The coffin shook once more, as though reacting to Watt's final words. Watt chuckled, and closed the door from the outside.

"Til then, take a nice, long rest, Gentleman Count."

There were no longer any footsteps in the sunlit room. Only the silent coffin remained.

Prologue 4: The Girl Outside the Coffin

Slurp slurp - blood dribbling down

A moist set of lips - *slurp slurp*

In the dark.

A lone man ran through a space of pure darkness. Was it the interior of a building? A cavern? Or a deep, dark forest where not even the moon would shine through?

"AAAAAAAAAARGH!"

With a meaningless scream, the man advanced forward into the shadows before him.

He was not heading for a destination, but moved as though in fear of something behind himself. His feet kicked off the ground again and again, laced with fear and moving far faster than any human was capable of.

Though the rest of his body was overcome by terror, his eyes alone displayed clear consciousness.

Distrust, rage, and endless despair.

'How could such a cursed being be allowed to exist?

'Why me? Why me?

'Why, why, why?'

As he allowed his thoughts to show clearly in his eyes and despised himself for being cornered this far, even his outrage was devoured by the despair dogging at his heels.

Suddenly, the darkness gave way to light. The moon peeked out from between the clouds, faintly illuminating the world.

Though the area had been pitch-black until just a few moments ago, the man had been running in a nearly straight line through the forest, giving away the fact that he was perfectly aware of his surroundings in the dark.

"AAAAAAAAAAAAAARGH!"

The inhuman man let out an inhuman scream. His voice echoed across the forest like a sonic wave.

And in an instant, his body and his voice turned black like a shadow, scattering in all directions.

It looked rather like the sight of a school of fish scattering in the wake of a shark attack, but gathering once more together were not fish, but countless ink-black bats.

Rather than the canine faces of greater Indian fruit bats, they were closer to vampire bats, hideously squashed noses and all.

But anyone who could observe the scene first-hand would deny both categorizations. Perhaps they would not even call these creatures 'bats'. Their unnatural black coat was one of the reasons, but more prominent was the appearances of their eyes.

The flock that had emerged in the wake of the man's flight had, without exception, the same eyes as those of the man. The bats' eyes were not like those of animals. Instead it looked as though human eyes had been forcibly transplanted into the bodies of the bats. This single abnormality would be enough to make a chill run down anyone's spine. It was more than enough to prove that this 'creature' was a monster—a vampire.

But *it* was waiting for him.

The despair that chased after him had been waiting for this very moment.

Just as the man's body was about to dissipate entirely into the flock, he felt a sharp impact on his back.

The strange shock affected not only the man, but also the countless bats that were scattering from his form. From a distance it looked almost as though a great stream of water had been turned on its side. The objects thrown by the pursuer drove themselves into the backs of each and every one of the bats.

A scream that transcended the hearing abilities of human ears began to echo from the mouths of dozens of bats.

A moment later, each and every one of them helplessly fell to the forest floor.

'What is this?! What just hit me?'

The fallen bats did not even have the strength to regroup. But the vampire's singular consciousness was desperately trying to understand what was going on.

The impact that had struck his scattered body—the backs of the bats—gave way to a cold pain that pierced them all the way through to their bellies.

'What... what in the world is going on?! What am I being stabbed with?! This color. Is it silver?! No. My cells are not being destroyed. Calm down. Calm down. Focus and put strength into those wings and re-converge and I can change into a wolf but I have to re-converge if I want to transform again—no. No. Please, if I could get at least one bat out of here—'

The vampire desperately struggled against the coming despair. But *she* slowly emerged from the dark as though mocking him.

The bats floundered on the ground.

Before the man could even get his thoughts in order, a slender leg stomped down on one of the bats, its thin ankle wrapped up in a large, rugged boot used for mountain climbing.

'PLEASE, NO!'

The man screamed, not out of pain, but terror. But as a flock of bats, he could not even utter words in a human voice—all anyone could hear was the sound of squeaking.

'Despair' watched the sight stoically and spoke to the man.

"Melhilm Herzog. You have all sorts of abilities, but turning yourself into fog is not one of them."

As he heard the mechanical recitation of his personal information, the man's mind fell deeper into despair.

'How does she know my name? And how in the world does she know even my abilities?! How could a human girl know so much about me?!'

The despair illuminated by the moonlight was a young woman with pretty features, likely of Asian descent.

She was the one who had given pursuit to the vampire called Melhilm.

Though he should rightly be much stronger than a human, for the first time in his life he had experienced true fear, at the sight of this girl who looked to be even more frail than most others of her species.

It was difficult to swallow this sense of humiliation, but he was soon overcome by another emotion.

'Who is this girl?! A mere human a powerless human how could she move even faster than I stronger than I why will my powers not work why why why—'

Initially he suspected that she was a vampire like himself, but the girl before him carried a purely human scent.

'Even if she's a dhampyr like Watt she's too strong! What is this how could something like this exist why my research is almost complete then we would be revered like legends and myths my dream so close so close—'

In an attempt to stave off the despair swallowing him whole, Melhilm attempted to bring another emotion to the surface of his thoughts.

This human woman who had achieved certain victory over a vampire—what kind of expression did she wear? The defeated man used one of the bats to look around at the woman's eyes with its own human eyes.

And so his wish was granted.

On the girl's face was neither a look of mechanical duty nor an expression of rage, but excitement. Her eyes as she looked down at Melhilm were wide and expectant like a child on Christmas morning.

As Melhilm calmed the turbulent emotions in his heart, he focused his consciousness at looking into the girl's face through one of his bats. She suddenly closed her eyes lightly, a smile on her lips.

"—Thanks for the meal—"

Her words were spoken in a foreign language that Melhilm did not understand, but everything would become clear to him soon enough. The girl picked up the bat he was looking through and brought it near to her face.

She took a peek at the bat's eerie human eyes. Though there were countless emotions swirling through its face, at the root of it all was intense fear of what was to come.

And as soon as she took note of this,

The girl bit off its tiny head without even blinking.

With joy, and greater joy still.

'AAAAAAGH!'

The vampire did not even have time to turn his consciousness away from the bat before he felt the sensation of his head being devoured.

It was a sensation on a different scale than mere pain. His psyche was simultaneously hit by the feeling of loss, and something being drawn from his body like a stream of energy.

In the midst of the flood of infinite agony, the man finally understood what this girl was, and cried,

'An Eater! So that's what you were! How could a lowly human—'

The final screams of the vampire Melhilm Herzog echoed from the bats as tiny supersonic waves, but they were lost to darkness, never to reach anyone's ears.

By the time she had finished devouring one bat, her mouth was covered in blood.

She then reached out to a second bat without a moment's hesitation.

The bats, each of them skewered through the back with metal forks, writhed and struggled even more intensely than before. But the forks embedded deep in their bellies would not allow them to move, as each despaired and awaited their turn.

Of course, each of the bats' consciousnesses belonged to one vampire.

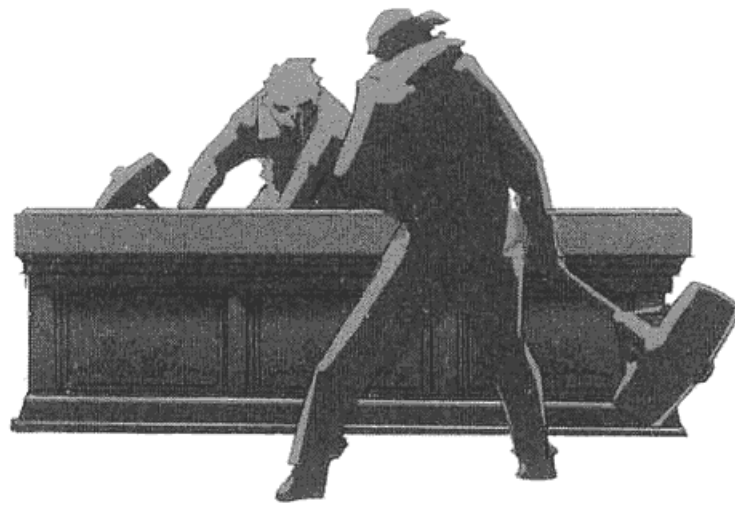
Whether she realized this or not, the girl chewed off another bat's head and gulped down its blood.

Though the sight of blood dribbling down her chin was terrifying to behold, it made for a surprisingly harmonious picture under the light of the moon.

She looked just like a vampire out of a storybook.

1章

棺の回りの狩人達



Chapter 1: The Hunters Around the Coffin

May 2004. On a ship on the German seas, in the vicinity of the island of Growerth.

"Vampires, you see..."

A large man began to speak. The people around him quietly gulped.

"They're not one, unified race. You've seen them in movies and books all the time. And 'course, some of you here have seen them in the flesh—though I guess even then, most of you haven't looked any of 'em in the eye."

The man took a deep breath, grinned, and continued.

"After all, it's our job to exterminate them before we get a look at their faces. The stronger they are, the more we take care to not look at them. And while they're snoring away in their coffins, we drag the whole damned thing into the sunlight, and *boom*."

The man suddenly opened his fist, making a gesture like something exploding.

Several people among them chuckled and sighed.

"Even the stronger ones have a tendency to dislike daylight. And sure, there might be ones that don't even blink under the sun, but even they can't put up much of a fight against us. Am I right?"

The man smiled and presented a conclusion that was in some ways rather illogical:

"Vampires are weak. They don't live up to those things you see in movies and legends."

On this uncharacteristically balmy day on the North Sea, a group numbering at about a dozen was gathered on the deck of a car ferry. Though most of them were dressed like tourists, there was something out of the ordinary in the way they carried themselves.

"Well, I guess they're still one hell of a lot stronger than regular humans, but I'm saying that fighting a vampire's nothing compared to fighting, say, a shark."

The well-built man speaking at the center of the group wore a military-style jacket. The countless scars over his face and arms were testament to the battlefields he had haunted in the past. His appearance made it seem that even more scars were hiding under his clothing, and that his face was no less grizzled than the rest of his body.

"In other words, *they* are not one unified species. I'm not talking skin colour or anything on that level. Every country and region has a different vampire myth, and that's exactly how things are in reality. Some of 'em can fly through the air, and others are slower than humans. Some can transform into bats, breathe fire, or hypnotize people by making eye contact. But I've *never* seen a single vampire who could do *all* of those things, like the ones in movies. I don't understand why, but just think of each vampire as being an entirely different race from another. That goes for their weaknesses, too. Some of 'em can cross running water just fine, and others are immune to crucifixes but scared of garlic, and so on. Staking 'em through the heart usually works, but some vampires are even immune to that."

The scarred man laughed, shook his head, and raised a finger into the air.

"One thing most of them have in common, though. They can't stand daylight. Some of 'em turn to ash before you can blink, and others are just weakened by the sun. But all we have to do is take advantage of that, and boom! The job's done. This is why our strategy is to get 'em during the day when they're still sleeping in their beds, and gently carry out their little bat-cradles. After that, we drive in about thirty or so stakes into the coffin and let her blow. That's how things work around here. Now, how many newbies have we got today?"

"Two, sir. We've got Val here—" A skinny, bespectacled man answered. A caucasian man who looked to be just over twenty years of age gave the others a light wave.

Cargilla, the scarred leader of the group, glanced at the other newcomer and spoke, cutting off the bespectacled man.

"And then we have our Eater here."

"...That's correct." The bespectacled man mumbled, glancing aside.

Standing there was a young woman of Asian descent. From her features, she was clearly not yet an adult—probably a teenager, who would not be out of place in a high school. She wore a white leather jacket, and her long hair was loosely tied behind her back.

The girl, whom Cargilla had referred to as an 'Eater', was sitting off to the side on her own, looking out at the sea. The waters were surprisingly gentle for the North Sea today as she stared into it without showing a hint of emotion.

She had been standing in the same position for many minutes now, her eerily pale skin exposed to the salty air. Cargilla snorted.

"Hmph. Striking one hell of a pose, eh? Pretty stuck-up for a freeloader."

It was then that the young man called Val hesitantly spoke up.

"What do you mean by 'freeloader', sir? And, uh... about that girl. What's an 'Eater'?"

Everyone tensed slightly at Val's question.

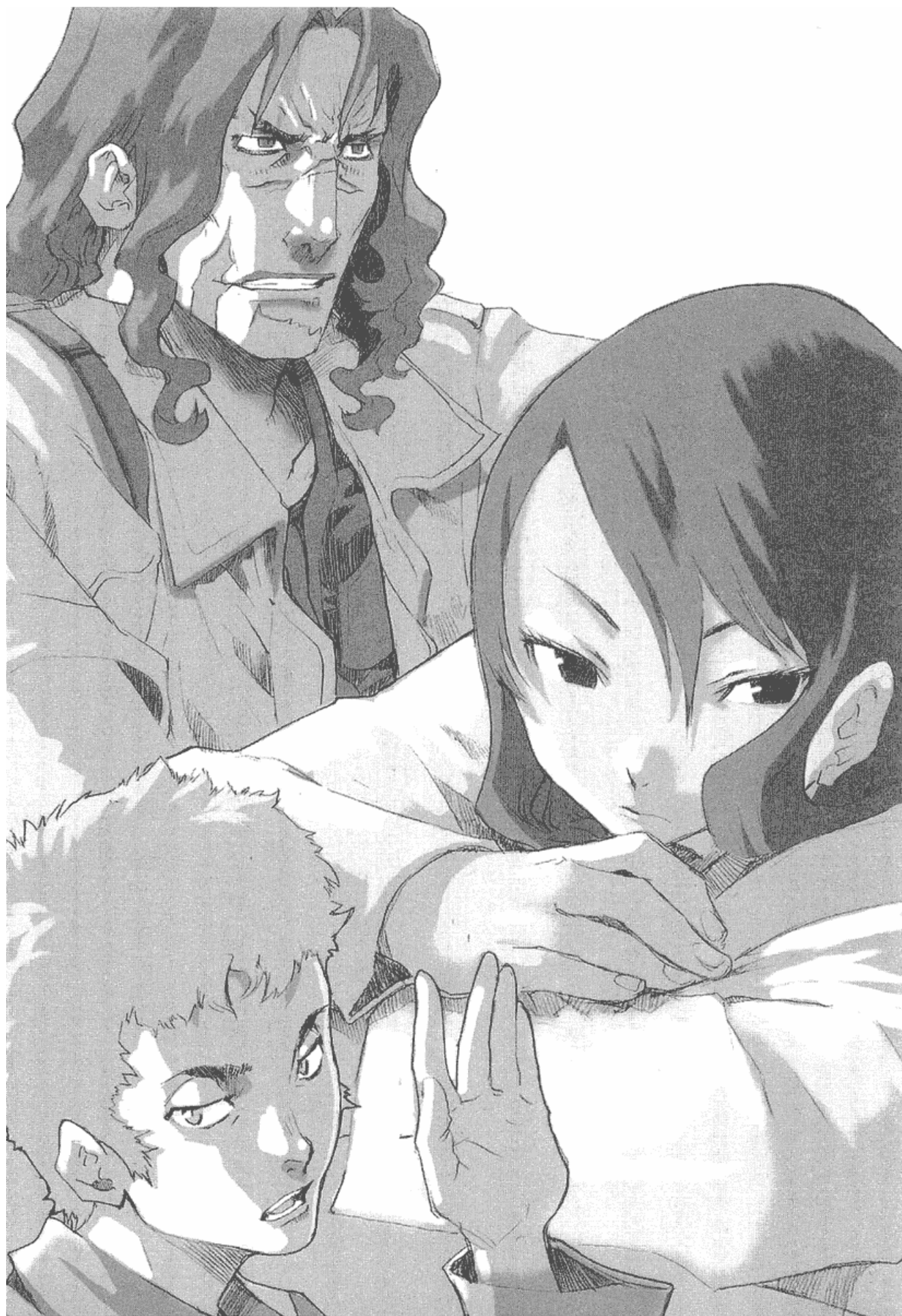
Cargilla scratched his head in annoyance and quietly spoke to the newcomer.

"Newbie. What's our job?"

"Huh? We're vampire exterminators, aren't we?"

"That's right." Cargilla nodded at Val's outlandish answer. "We're not so much mercenaries as we are healthcare workers. We ambush vampires during the day when they can't put up a fight, and take care of them nice and quick. And then we get our pay, whether it's from a relieved city or village council, a millionaire who's scared for his daughter's safety... Or a religious organization that people like them crawl to when they're in trouble. Right?"

"Right, sir."



These people were not part of any officially sanctioned group. They were a team that exterminated vampires for a living—not a secret society that worked in the shadows, but a group that put up ads on magazines and newspapers, and ran a website on the internet.

These people—the self-proclaimed 'Otherworld Welfare Inc. Branch 666', sold anti-vampire tools such as garlic spray, wooden stakes-and-hammer kits, and talismans written in chicken blood for Asian customers, over the internet. Most people who browsed their pages took it as a silly joke. But they had a surprisingly large customer base of people who bought their products for amusement. Ultimately, their sales yielded millions in profit every year.

But from the perspective of these 'exterminators', their work in eliminating vampires was entirely serious. They did business like any other company, but they did not have a set base of operations, constantly moving from one place to another. It was as though they feared some sort of retaliation.

"Nobody in the entire world suspects us. If our ads were even a little bit realistic for 'em, we'd get complaints about fraud or false advertising, but put up a sign that says 'Vampire Extermination', and it actually works. Which is also the reason why we went for that infantile '666' subtitle."

Cargilla laughed, his white teeth showing between his lips.

"The people who come to us are the ones who get threatened by actual vampires. They get pointed to churches or the police or a hospital at best, and in the end they come to us because they have nowhere else to turn. A father saying, 'My daughter's eyes have gone dull, and there are two red spots on her neck', a child claiming to have witnessed his mother doing dirty things with a bat in the dead of night, or someone who finds themselves the only sane person left in their family."

Although they had never actually encountered such exaggerated cases before, Cargilla laughed self-deprecatingly.

"And the most important part of our business is getting as much money out of those poor desperate souls as we can. If the client is still a kid, we have to start by making the parents believe in vampires. If the family's poor, we convince the community. And if that doesn't work, the local church."

"Churches? I thought they already had people of their own for dealing with vampires." Val said. Cargilla wagged his index finger.

"Maybe they do. There's gotta be more people than we'll ever know doing this kind of work. Governments included. I bet Russia and the States might already have a vampire or two in their custody, doing experiments on 'em. But that's none of our business. Same with churches. There might be other groups like us who would rather work for free, but there's no way they'd ever be able to take on all that work. That speaks for just how many vampires there are in this world."

"And people still treat vampires like a myth, huh?"

"Not necessarily. There's quite a few people who believe in vampires, even though they're skeptical about UFOs and ghosts. And like I said before, they all have a range of differences. Some don't even drink blood. They're vampires in name only. There's idiots in South America that only drink blood from livestock and end up getting mistaken for aliens."

The newcomer looked slightly confused. Cargilla spoke before the younger man could even ask his question.

"But none of that matters in the end. Do they drink human blood or not? Frankly, it doesn't matter if the vampire's actually on the side of humans or if he's a good guy or whatever. What's important is that we kill 'em and get paid."

"But doesn't it bother you, sir?"

"That's why we kill 'em in broad daylight. And it's also why we don't look at their faces. Some vampires look like the hottest women in the world, or even innocent children. Now imagine if one of those looked you in the eye and said 'I'm not your enemy, please trust me'. Whether they're telling the truth or not, you'll *always* get a couple of idiots who actually believe that. That's why we blow them to bits before they can tell us if they're good or evil."

"That's pretty brutal."

"And say that it really *is* a good vampire we're hired to take care of. The fact that someone reported its hiding hole to us means that it's done something worth reporting already. There might not have been any victims yet, but the moment the locals get scared and call us, it's over."

Cargilla lit a cheap cigar and looked up at the clear blue sky.

There was neither excitement nor sympathy in his eyes. He was speaking as a businessman, nothing more.

"Just like this time." He concluded. But Val spoke up to continue the conversation.

"Uh, I don't know if that answers my question."

"Huh? What question?" Cargilla replied, looking like he had honestly forgotten. The newcomer repeated himself, embarrassed.

"Sir, that Asian girl! What in the world is she?"

Cargilla's eyes snapped open at the reminder. He exhaled a cloud of cigar smoke.

"Oh. 'Course. Of course. Sorry 'bout that. Completely forgot." He breathed in the cigar smoke, taking in the reverberation of the ferry. "Our job is to hunt vampires for pay, but not everyone works for the same purpose. Once in a blue moon you come across someone who's not doing this for their faith or duty or a sense of justice. That girl there is one of the best of 'em. See, she's an Eater. And we work with people like her sometimes."

Cargilla stopped, expelled the smoke from his lungs, and continued.

"Name says it all, doesn't it? They eat vampires."

"...What?"

The newcomer looked around in confusion. But his dozen or so co-workers looked away, and several shot the girl disgusted glares.

"It's like some sort of black magic. They're a bunch of crazies. They tear out the vampire's neck before it can get to theirs."

"What does that mean, sir?"

Cargilla's answer was simple and true.

"They devour the vampire's flesh, drink their blood, kill them, then mix in their ashes with water and drink it. They're trying to gain the power of vampires while remaining human."

Val took about five seconds to process this new information. He looked at the girl with a slightly different expression.

"Is that even possible?"

"Who knows? I've tried it with ashes before, but it never worked for me. I guess blood must work best, but how could anyone get a hold of vampire blood without waking it up, in broad daylight? In the sun, they'll turn to ash instantly. In the shade, they'll fight back. But that girl over there's a bit of a celebrity in our line of work. Can't turn into bats or wolves, but in terms of raw power and reaction time she's literally vampire-level. You'll see once you see her in action. You won't be able to *disbelieve* by then."

A tinge of hatred and fear rose to Cargilla's eyes.

"Listen up, newbie. That doesn't mean I dislike that power of hers. I'm damn scared because she somehow managed to drink a vampire's blood before it got turned to ash. Some say that she made a deal with a vampire to drink its blood by dragging thirty exterminators like us into a trap."

It was still possible for her to have taken blood by force from a vampire who was only weakened by sunlight, but Cargilla did not seem to be satisfied with that conclusion.

"If you want an easier way to get a vampire's power, just let one of them turn you. If you're not tainted yet, you should be all good. But Eaters are different. Fouled. Trying to gain all of a vampire's powers, but none of their weaknesses. If Vampire Hunters actually existed, they wouldn't be dhampyr like in those legends. They'd be people like her—quick-thinking, underhanded, and determined to the point of annoyance."

He dragged his cigar against the deck and extinguished it.

"Just like vampires." He concluded.

When their mission had been first confirmed, a lone girl came to their recruitment location, asking to join them.

They were in the middle of a great flat wasteland. The one road in sight led straight to the horizon. There was nothing but a small drive-thru building and a parked van around them.

Cargilla, sitting in the driver's seat of the nondescript van, looked at the girl outside as though examining a scientific specimen.

He could tell at a glance that she was of Asian descent. Her figure was rather full to be called a 'girl' still—her arms and legs were lean but muscular, reminiscent of a feline in top form. Under her thin white jacket she wore only a tank top.

Normally Cargilla might have opted for a catcall, but there was a hint of youth still in the girl's face, and she was staring straight at him while suppressing some sort of emotion. The incongruity of her appearance convinced Cargilla to think twice about treating her as a woman—of course, she was a bit too young for him anyway.

The strange girl spoke first in clumsy English.

"Um... Once more. Killing Growerth Island vampire? I want to help."

Initially he thought it a joke and thought to get out of the car to shoo the girl away.

"Hey, Missy. Where'd you hear about us? You hack our website or something? I know we're not really in a position to consider anything a joke or anything, but this ain't a sightseeing trip... wha-?"

"I know."

The girl's voice came from behind him.

When he had stepped off the driver's seat, she had unmistakably been in front of the car. But by the time he realized it, the girl had disappeared and re-appeared behind him.

Her mature, monotone voice sounded almost like that of a killer reading out a death sentence. Cold fear ran through his veins.

"I know. I came because I know."

'Is she a vampire?!'

But naturally, it was still daytime. The sun was blazing hard enough to make his skin tingle. And as far as Cargilla knew, no vampires were unaffected by the sun. Some legends spoke of vampires immune to daylight, but every vampire he had encountered so far avoided it like the plague and lived in the shadows.

"You can't take legends at face value."

He had said this before. And when a subordinate asked, *"What if we end up fighting one that's immune to sunlight?"*, he had replied, *"Then we all get hypnotized and turned into zombies, or we get our blood sucked out and get turned into freeze-dried food."*

Such vampires, however, did not exist. And even if they did, he was certain that vampires of that caliber would not bother with a group like his—not that he had any intention of facing one. Creatures like that were better left to some secret police or a hidden organization from the Vatican, he thought.

They were merely running a business aimed at a niche. They would not expand their market, merely exterminating vampires that were weak to sunlight and receiving pay in return. That was how they lived.

But one existence that went completely against this philosophy of his had appeared before him and disappeared behind his back.

If she really was a vampire who could move at such speeds even under the sun, he was finished. Cargilla reached this conclusion, barely managing to suppress his scream but unable to stop the cold sweat streaming down his body.

"I will help, not get in the way. Let me go too." The girl said emotionlessly. It took Cargilla all the courage he ever had to respond.

"Wh—who are you? What do you want?"

The girl's response was monotone, but it clearly held back a greater power inside.

"Kijima Shizune. Japanese. Sixteen years old."

Her final descriptor answered Cargilla's questions.

"Eater."

†

She could hear the fearful voices and feel the gazes of the others as she listened to the sound of the waves.

Shizune Kijima closed her eyes.

'Do they think I can't hear them? Or are they doing this on purpose?

'No... I guess most people can't hear this well. Normal humans couldn't do this. But I can hear it because I'm different. I can hear things I don't need to hear—things I don't want to hear.'

The girl in white leather made up her mind to ignore her allies' chatter. Val, who had been smoothly sweet-talking her before they boarded the ferry, was now whispering about her in a hushed voice.

Of course, Shizune had ignored him entirely earlier, and she felt no great loss in continuing to do so. She also knew that her fellow employees—no, exterminators—were also avoiding her. But that did not impede her determination in the slightest.

'I chose this path of my own will. I have no regrets.'

Shizune's reason for killing vampires was simple but firm.

Revenge. That was how it all began.

The vampire appeared before her back when she had still been living in a small village in the mountains of Hokuriku.

Having been entirely ignorant, unprepared, and uninterested in vampires up to that point, the creature's arrival signaled the beginning of an end for Shizune.

It started with two little problems. Two little puncture wounds.

Two little puncture wounds on her little brother's neck.

It was the start of the night when everything had been stolen from her.

That night, a forest fire ravaged the tiny village, leaving behind twenty-two charred corpses. The incident left Japan shaken for about a month. And nothing happened afterwards.

The autopsy reports showed that the victims had all been killed before their bodies were burned. Gossip magazines had wasted no time in making comparisons to the Tsuyama Massacre², but the lack of a clear cause of death meant that no one could know if the deaths were even homicides or suicides. The case was left to disappear in uncertainty.

The ten-year-old girl who had narrowly avoided the tragedy also went missing, as though in an attempt to avoid media attention. And now, years later, she was on a ferry taking her to the island of Growerth.

What she wanted at the moment she resolved to hunt vampires was, simply, power.

Having chosen the path of an Eater, Shizune was more than used to solitude. Her allies' coldness to her did not particularly bother her. She merely disliked having to listen to their voices.

She could not stand hearing others talk about her with fear, disgust, or sometimes sympathy and pity, despite not knowing a thing about her.

'If only people didn't have voices and languages. If only we could only communicate with actions...'

It had been over six years now since she first drank the blood of a vampire.

The quickest way to gain power—power to annihilate vampires—was to become an Eater.

In the six years since, she had devoured the flesh of over a hundred vampires, drinking their blood and even their ashes.

For her first few kills, she had to take them by surprise or receive help from others, but by the time she had eaten ten or so vampires, her own strength was enough.

She would corner her target with raw power and sink her teeth into their arms and legs. The victim would be mortified by her—the human—and her superhuman feats of strength, and their shock would soon give way to fear.

Those fleeting moments had been precisely what Shizune lived for. They were the light of her life and the greatest pleasure permitted to her.

² The Tsuyama Massacre took place in 1938 in the rural village of Kaio in Okayama, Japan. It was an incident in which a young man brutally murdered thirty villagers after cutting the power to the village.

When she first felt joy at this sight, she came to a realization: the moment she accepted vengeance as pleasure, she had lost her humanity.

Shizune had watched the vampire before her, dissolving to ash under the moonlight with a stake through its chest. For a moment she tasted despair, but she brought a hand to her face, a slight grin forming, and realized something else.

The expression on the vampire's face—of fear, despair, shock, and the question—'Why me?'.

It was the very expression Shizune had worn on her face the night her life was turned upside-down.

She killed many vampires. She annihilated them.

As many and many and many as there were.

She did not go after vampires recklessly. Shizune deliberately chose her targets, making sure to select ones she knew for certain that she could defeat. Savoring each and every meal as she continued to build up strength and experience.

Revenge was no longer her motivation. She was being controlled by a great invisible force.

'No, that's not it. There is no invisible power on high. I control myself. The force that propels me is right here.'

She continued to slay vampires one after another in order to remain herself, she thought, trying to justify her actions.

But as she took joy in slaughtering her prey, the fact of her self-told lie came back to the surface.

As life went on, Shizune eventually stopped thinking about it. She knew that, no matter what conclusion she reached, she would never stop.

'I am a monster. Of course people are going to avoid me.' she thought, and allowed her thoughts to disdainfully wander back to the other exterminators.

'I know what it's like to be an Eater. So I can excuse myself. I have the right to think this way, hating and looking down on myself. But who do they think they are? Talking behind my back with nothing but assumptions backing them up. They don't know anything about me. They get lucky with their targets and think they're strong. It's like guessing answers in a multiple choice question. And they still lord it over as if they know everything.'

Deciding that there was no use in complaining about her problems out loud, Shizune turned her attention back to the sea.

The air was calm, but the waves below surged back and forth.

And in the distance, at the center of the horizon before the ferry, a small dot appeared.

The little shape soon spread over the horizon, becoming a mountain surrounded by green.

A rather sizable city soon became visible along the foot of the mountain. Shizune's superhuman sense of sight allowed her to spot a certain structure amidst the scenery.

Waldstein Castle. Said to have been named after its master, it had been renovated in its entirety, and a save for a small section, it had been designated a tourist attraction. That small section was where Shizune and the exterminators had their business.

Remembering the reason she was going to the island, Shizune quietly began to renew her focus.

†

The ferry made port on the island. Tourists and their luggage disembarked one after another.

"Perfect weather today. Looks like we'll be done before sunset." Cargilla said. The bespectacled man, who seemed to be his second-in-command, spoke up.

"Sir, we also have to speak with the client directly."

"We're splitting up. You take a few people to see the client, and contact me by radio if anything goes wrong."

"What about you, sir?"

"Can't speak a lick of German. But it shouldn't be a problem for a native speaker like you, eh? I'm counting on you."

The subordinate nodded, and left the group with two exterminators in tow. Their group had brought along two vans and a small car for the job. The bespectacled man went to the smaller vehicle, and began to leave the port with his two companions.

He then caught a glimpse of the crewmen unloading some of the cargo.

"...? Those boxes seem a bit large for tourists to be lugging around. Is someone moving here, I wonder?"

The bespectacled man's car quietly drove along the smoothly paved road, past the hulking workmen carrying bed-sized cargo.

After watching his subordinates leave, Cargilla looked over the sight of the port town and gave his verdict.

"Strange."

"What do you mean?" Asked Val the newcomer.

Whether he was conscious of Val's curiosity or not, Cargilla continued as though speaking to himself.

"It might have been an *indirect* request, but we basically have the mayor asking us to exterminate a vampire. If things've gone that far, then there'd be rumors all over the streets. But this place is too energetic. Too peaceful."

"Maybe the rumors are there, but no one believes in them. Or maybe only the mayor and his middleman know about it..."

"...No. Judging from experience, where there's vampires, there's always something like an omen, or a strange vibe. Whether or not it's a tourist destination, whenever there's rumors floating around, people always get suspicious of big groups of visitors like ours. But..."

Cargilla observed the harbor once more, and shook his head in defeat.

"...It's just too quiet."

Just before he stepped into his van, the leader of the exterminators looked over the town and mumbled to himself.

"It's in an even better state than most places that *don't* have vampires..."

The two vans and the cars of every passenger that had been onboard the ferry eventually disappeared.

Standing before the cargo that had been transported to the basement of the harbor office, a pair of workers began whispering to each other.

"Anyway, it's a real honor, isn't it?"

"What is?"

"I can't believe I've been entrusted with transporting Viscount Waldstein's family!"

The basement was dark, lit only by a fluorescent light. However, the room looked less like a storage chamber and more like a high-class sitting room. The cargo that had been brought here all bore the name of one particular owner, and each had been wrapped with the utmost care.

"I feel like I'm not worthy, you know? They could've just had their familiars do it. So... what the heck happened to 'em all? Those maids in green, the baobhan sith³, right? All those maids! Can you believe it?"

Of the cargo, only two pieces had been unpackaged—a pair of small coffins. One of the workers, standing before them, complained wearily.

"I hear they're cleaning up after the trip. The two of 'em just wanted to come back earlier."

"So they can't stand waiting in line like the rest of us, eh? Kids'll be kids." The worker laughed.

³ The baobhan sith is a type of female vampire in Scottish mythology. They dress in green and seduce young travelers.

At that very moment, a small voice escaped one of the coffins.

"It is truly disappointing."

The voice was unmistakably young and female, tinged with crystalline beauty.

"Since when has it been permitted for the people of this island to mock their masters?"

The workmen froze. One of the coffins was open.

The moment they heard the voice, the men nervously turned their gazes towards the coffins. But they never noticed the lid opening.

"To think that plebeian lowborns would dare to insult Honored Brother.."

Rage and disgust were clear in her tone. And by the time these words reached the men's ears, a girl was standing before them.

She was wearing a mainly black gothic-style dress. Her eyes, so sharp they could not be human, glared daggers at the men.

Of course, she had neither stopped the flow of time nor teleported to her current location. The men were merely so terrified that their minds were playing tricks on them. Adding fuel to the fire were the girl's graceful movements, fluid and lacking in excess.

"...!"

"...Y-y-you're... a-awake—"

As the men grasped for words, the girl unleashed her tranquil fury upon them.

"Were you counting on the sunlight to protect your secrecy? I now understand exactly how you speak of us when we are not present."

"N-not at all, milady! We weren't-"

"Hold your ignoble tongue, you wretch!"

The girl's sudden burst of anger left the men petrified, as though her words themselves were a magic spell. Although it was a comically out-of-place line in this day and age, the girl's eyes, possessed of a superhuman glint, would not allow it to be taken as such.

The men's knees trembled as their fear reached its peak. But suddenly—

"Hwaaaaaa..."

It was a yawn laid-back enough to shatter a thousand years' worth of fear.

The workmen felt as though the frozen atmosphere of the room had melted instantly, and noticed that the yawn had come from the second coffin.

At the same time, they also realized that the girl was holding her hands up to their throats with a look that could kill.

"-----!"

Letting out a soundless scream, the workmen broke out into cold sweat. The girl's hands were small and childlike, but the men had instinctively noticed the bloodlust with which they were held at their necks. If not for the yawn, their lives would have been already lost.

The girl lowered her hands just as a voice carried out from the second coffin. It was a boy's voice, laid-back and gentle in a sharp contrast to the girl's.

"Hello. Oh, thank you so much for carrying us all the way here."

"Uh..."

The workmen gaped in confusion. The boy in the coffin, however, seemed not to have heard them. He continued nonchalantly.

"We can take care of ourselves. You can get back to work now."

The voice from inside the closed coffin was calm and sincere, not a hint of ridicule hidden in its tone.

Although it took a few moments, the workmen regained their senses and fled through the doorway to the staircase, looking as though they had just been granted salvation itself.

Left behind were the brother in the coffin and the quiet sister.

It felt as though the silence would last forever. But the sister—Ferret von Waldstein—monotonously criticized her brother.

"...Honored Brother, that was much too merciful an act."

The voice from the coffin was pretending as though nothing was wrong.

"What do you mean?"

"Honored Brother, of all the bald-faced lies to tell, turning a blind eye to the babbling of those lowborns... Those of our bloodline have no need to breathe. What reason is there for you to yawn?!"

"Who cares? It's not like our bloodline has any power anyway."

"Honored Brother, I am ashamed!" Ferret cried. Her voice echoed back and forth through the basement. The air itself began to ring.

But the voice of the brother within the coffin—Relic—did not stumble in the slightest.

"If you think I'm doing something wrong, then go ahead and speak your mind. Even if it means disagreeing with me. Remember? I just want you to be yourself."

Just as the brother refused to falter, the sister refused to bow to his wish.

"And I have made my answer known. I shall exercise that freedom and choose to remain at your side this way, Honored Brother."

"So the unstoppable force meets the immovable object, huh? ...I wonder how Father would solve this."

"Father has nothing to do with this matter!" Ferret raised her voice at Relic's half-joking tone.

Relic's coffin was still closed shut, but Ferret could see the chuckle on her brother's face clearly—it was not that she could see through objects, but she could predict her brother's actions and expressions to a certain degree.

Relic snickered just as his sister expected, and quieted down.

"I'm going to sleep a little longer. We have a lot of people to see once the sun goes down..."

Ferret could hear the excitement in Relic's voice. She looked away from his coffin for the first time and sighed.

"You mean to say that you wish to see your human childhood friend. Her name was Hilda, was it not?"

Relic was not so unfazed this time.

"...Are you trying to get back at me or something? You've known Hilda for as long as I have."

"That is not my intention. It is no concern of mine should you feel affection towards a human girl, Honored Brother. The matter of whether you feel guilt about the partaking of human blood, whether that matter leads you to believe that a vampire could never be joined with a human in love, and whether that leads you to fear confessing your feelings towards Hilda or not have absolutely nothing to do with me."

"W-watch it! I could make a whole movie out of my problems. You can't just sum it all up that quickly!" Relic stammered, having lost his lead in the conversation. There was a *thud* from the coffin, making it clear that he had just hit his head on the inside of the lid.

Ferret smiled and continued to corner her brother, her intonation refusing to give away any hint of emotion.

"I understand. I understand everything there is to know about you, Honored Brother. How you never once allowed yourself to take the blood of a human by force. How you only drank blood on rare occasions, and only with consent. And how you would never attempt to subjugate the human!"

Relic's coffin remained silent. Ferret's frustration subsided quickly, and she looked away as though what she was about to say hurt her as much as it would him. She had already realized how far she had gone with her accusations, but there was no turning back at this point.

"And... that all of this was because you could never forget Hilda."

"...Is that all you wanted to say, Ferret?"

Relic's reply was so calm and clear that Ferret trembled for a moment.

An indescribable silence came over the siblings, the coffin lying between them.

How much time had passed? Relic was the first to break the silence.

"Zzz..."

He was breathing softly, almost exaggerated in the childishness of the sound.

Ferret was dumbstruck by the display, but only for a moment. A stubborn look came over her face as she raised her voice again.

"Honored Brother, I have said this already—a true vampire such as yourself has no need to breathe."

"...Uh... snore... zzz..."

The exaggerated breathing continued. Ferret angrily stepped back into her own coffin.

"Hmph! I will care no longer!"

She turned her back towards her brother and shut the lid of her own coffin.

The sea breeze blew through the basement room, now truly enveloped in silence.

†

Growerth was by no means a small island. It was a prominently large isle in Germany, with a moderately successful tourism industry.

Several cities were on the island, upon which were everything from streets resembling the Middle Ages to modern-day civic centers and hotels. Of course, there were no skyscrapers on the island—five-story hotels were about as tall as they went. And yet not a single room was vacant during the busy tourist season. Old buildings by the large streets that had been renovated into hotels were also quite popular with visitors.

It was not currently that season, so at the moment the island's population consisted mostly of local residents. But there was still nothing unusual about just over a dozen men and women visiting for a so-called company outing. No one paid any mind to Cargilla and the others, spread out between two vans.

As for their large luggage, which contained all sorts of tools for their trade, they snuck it past by claiming that they contained camping gear. No one closely inspected the interiors of the vans and the car, leaving the exterminators in awe of Growerth's lax security.

"Guess I shouldn't be complaining about a stroke of luck like that."

Their clients this time were a married couple living on the island. They had immigrated to Germany from Britain about ten years ago. According to them, the first several years on

Growerth were nothing out of the ordinary. But one day, they realized something frightening about the world around them.

There were vampires living on the island.

These were not vaguely mysterious creatures or supposed poltergeists. They were vampires in the flesh, their forms clearly real and physical.

It was absurd to think they could exist. In some ways, the existence of ghosts or aliens would have been easier to believe.

At first, the couple themselves must have been the least willing to believe. Though Growerth was an isolated island, how could they have expected creatures from the likes of B-movies and cheap thrillers to be hiding in plain view?

"How'd they contact us?"

Cargilla asked the man in the passenger seat, turning the steering wheel.

"It seems they consulted the mayor in secret. The mayor was the one who acted as the mediator. He also knew about vampires, so he contacted us through a referral. On the surface, the couple is our client, but the mayor's the one who took care of most of the pay. ...Didn't you read the report, sir?"

Cargilla shrugged.

"I skipped that part. All I care about is where we can find our target's crib. That's all that matters."

"Again with that irresponsible... Sir, doing some research ahead of time will make things safer for us. Don't you remember that time we almost ended up blowing up a very human vampire maniac?"

"That's ancient history." Cargilla chuckled, and glanced up at the rear-view mirror.

The Eater girl was on the van following behind them.

He could not see Shizune in either the driver's seat or the passenger seat next to it. She had probably curled up somewhere at the back of the vehicle. And judging from the petrified state of the other exterminators in that van, they did not seem to be speaking to her at all.

'Ah, well. I guess they can't do much when there's a girl like that around.'

If she were a little more friendly, she might have been able to strike up a conversation with some of her fellow exterminators. People tended to avoid Eaters on principle, but the biggest reason for her solitude was her own taciturn attitude.

If nothing else, it was a relief that she did not say anything demeaning to her fellow exterminators, but no one had any way of knowing what was going on in her head.

'Damn it. I've got all the money and connections in the world, but...'

Making meaningless comparisons in his mind, Cargilla turned his attention to the mountains that they were driving into.

Smaller hills rose up around them, covered in deciduous trees. And at the top of the mountain before them was a castle straight out of the Middle Ages.

It rose into the air majestically, as though it was reigning over the city, its people, and even the ships sailing the nearby waters.

"No wonder it's a tourist attraction."

"Waldstein Castle—apparently it was inhabited by an aristocrat by the name of Waldstein in the Middle Ages."

As they drew closer, the majesty of the castle spread out over them, making it seem as though the air itself was getting heavier.

"It's one amazing place, I'll give them that much. Were the Waldsteins that powerful?"

"I'm not certain. There aren't many records left of them today. Though I suppose that can't be helped, seeing as they lived on a backwater island that only recently became a tourist destination."

"Doesn't that make you wonder why they had a castle this big on a backwater island?"

Cold sweat finally began to run down Cargilla's back. He could feel it in his bones—there was something different about this mission. Alarm bells were going off in his head, but he justified the chill with the presence of the Eater and tried to remain calm.

"It is a tourist attraction, but there are areas of the castle that have been cordoned off for cultural preservation purposes—" One man began, but Cargilla interrupted him loudly.

"I told you, I read that part of the report. That castle's where our target is. All right, everyone! Charge!"

Sadly enough, no one responded with battle cries or cheers.

"You bastards have no concept of timing, do you?"

†

A bedroom in Waldstein Castle.

"...The hell."

Cargilla and the others had infiltrated the castle, along with all their extermination gear.

"That was way too easy."

It had been a minute since they stormed the castle. They were now looking down on a white coffin.

†

A little earlier.

As the exterminators disembarked from their vehicles, they came face-to-face with the kind of castle they might have seen in storybooks.

Though it was supposedly a tourist attraction, there was no entry fee and no security measures to speak of. They had free rein to go wherever they pleased. Naturally, there was no sign-in desk of any sort. It was as though the castle was just there, with the beautiful gardens surrounding it.

According to the mayor, he had barred entry to the castle under pretense of renovation work. It seemed he was true to his word, as the exterminators did not notice any presence in the castle other than their own.

However, the sheer scale of the castle overwhelmed their senses. The exterminators were overcome by a fear like nothing they had experienced on earlier missions.

The vampires they had terminated thus far generally lived in huts on the outskirts of settlements, old manors, mills, or caves in the mountainside. More unusual haunts included apartments, underground parking lots, and abandoned factories, but this was the first time in the history of the company that their target was resting in such a blatantly stereotypical location.

But what truly chilled them to the bone was that when they stepped into the cordoned-off area of the castle, further towards the back, they found the large white coffin in the first room they had peeked into.

"Now what, Boss?"

"...As if I need to tell you..."

Unable to hide his confusion, Cargilla quietly approached the coffin.

The other exterminators looked equally bemused, wondering if this was some sort of a trap or a large-scale prank by their clients, who might have even roped in their mayor into the act.

But one person among them—Shizune—looked on from a distance, darkly glaring at the white coffin.

Cargilla and the others cautiously inspected it, but they could not find any sign of damage. There were, strangely enough, many shoe prints on the lid of the coffin, but Cargilla noticed something even more unnerving and yelled.

"...What is this? Woodworking glue?"

Something like rosin was filling the gap between the lid and base of the coffin. It was translucent, like some sort of superglue, and looked as though it was there to seal off the coffin entirely, preventing even a drop of water from escaping.

Not only was the lid stuck to the base, the coffin itself was quite sturdy. They would need more than just a crowbar to open something like this.

"...What's going on here?" One of the exterminators asked nervously. But Cargilla naturally had no witty comeback prepared.

Val anxiously looked up at their pensive leader and piped up hesitantly.

"Is it really a vampire in there? What if the couple or the mayor committed a murder or something and they're trying to frame us for it?"

"We've confirmed all the intel about this job. Besides, if they have any brains they'd dump the corpse somewhere in the mountains instead of dragging in a rowdy bunch like us. And if they're just toying with us, well... We'll cross that bridge when we get to it. We'll squeeze out every last penny from the clients and the mayor both."

"This is hopeless..." Val muttered, looking around. Suddenly, Shizune spoke up from behind him.

"Here."

"Huh?"

The Eater had opened her mouth for the first time since coming to the island.

She did not seem to be very confident in anything but her native tongue, stringing words together to make her ideas known.

"Here inside. The vampire. I feel it."

The exterminators gulped. They had come to this place because they knew the vampire was here, but Shizune's confirmation made the air feel heavier than ever.

"...So you can sense vampires, eh? How can you tell? They don't even breathe."

"Don't believe me? Fine."

Shizune responded to Cargilla's retort with disdain and silence. She then resumed glaring at the coffin that lay behind several exterminators as though she were sending it a silent challenge.

'Damn. That's cold. The only thing female about her is that pretty face and that nice rack.'

Tossing out insults in his head, Cargilla got to work.

"As for the demolition... Right. We can go out that door and out onto the balcony—no. Maybe the rooftop terrace is a better idea. As long as we can get somewhere with some nice sunlight."

The exterminators dragged the coffin outside with a practiced hand, though there was something clumsy about them this time. They had gone through this procedure many times before, but things were off today. Though they might have been able to overcome one peculiarity, there was just too much this time that bothered them today.

The Japanese Eater who suddenly came to them before the mission.

The eerily peaceful streets.

The majestic castle frequented by tourists, the kind of place in which no normal vampire would choose to rest.

And the white coffin, laid out before them as though prepared by a thoughtful host.

"This has got to be a trap—"

"Shut it!" Cargilla roared at the newbie, but he soon realized that he was just trying to calm his own anxiety—leading him to feel even worse than before.

When he received his first extermination assignment from the president of the company, he had neither believed that he was capable of killing vampires nor that vampires existed to begin with. That was why he had been able to nonchalantly drag out the coffin from the designated location, drive explosive-laden stakes through it, and blow it up under the sun.

The creature exposed to the desert sunlight writhed where it lay, covered in wooden splinters and shrapnel. It soon stiffened like a pillar of salt and scattered into ash without even igniting.

The first thought that ran through his head was a panicked, '*A person?!*'. It was then followed by the terror of realizing that the creature was not human. Afterwards came the satisfaction of watching it dissolve before his eyes.

'I killed—no, exterminated it. That inhuman creature.'

By the time the realization hit him, he was laughing.

A creature that should have rightly been stronger than himself—the kind of monster straight out of movies and legends—had been helplessly reduced to dust because he had attacked it in its sleep.

He had never realized that the act of extermination could be this satisfying.

It was surprisingly easy to destroy those creatures. During the day they could bang on the coffin or kick it as hard as they could, but the vampires would not wake. Things were different at night, but they were not so foolish as to expend such needless effort.

Vampires had no official records to speak of. The exterminators would receive thanks for slaying them, but the law was never a factor. The explosives they used were just enough for one coffin and a person, so the blast was never a problem unless there were other residences in very close quarters—which was rather unlikely, as vampires seldom resided in largely populated areas.

The more vampires they exterminated, the more they fell to the pleasure.

Naturally, very few people who chose this path were completely sane. Most had done mercenary work like Cargilla had before fleeing, had rejected a normal life, or were thugs who had neither talent nor drive.

Whenever they recruited new exterminators, they received two kinds of applicants. Fanatics obsessed with the occult, and people willing to do anything for money. Obviously, they hired those who fit the latter category.

The exterminators were unnerved by Shizune, but perhaps at the core they were not so different from one another.

The greatest difference between them, however, would be the caliber of vampires they had faced in the past. Their attitudes served as testament to their experiences.

Cargilla was daunted by the unfamiliar situation before him, but Shizune remained guarded—not at all different from her usual demeanor. She was focused and ready, prepared to react to any little change that could befall them.

The bedroom was directly connected to the rooftop terrace. As six exterminators dragged the coffin upstairs, several of them began whispering nervously.

"Hey, doesn't this coffin feel... weird?"

"...Yeah. Like something's sloshing inside it."

"I feel like we're moving a fish tank or something..."

Something about this coffin disturbed them, but they could not drop it midway through.

By the time they brought it out into the sunlight, they seemed to be even more terrified of the contents of the coffin than usual.

"Tch. What are you, pansies? Hey, start the camcorder." Cargilla said.

One of the exterminators set up an old Handycam. With a mechanical whirr, the tape inside began rolling.

The footage they shot would be used for reference purposes and as proof that they had indeed exterminated the target.

Noting the start of the recording out of the corner of his eye, Cargilla slowly reached down towards his walkie-talkie.

"It's me. How're things on your end?" He asked calmly. The second-in-command, who had gone to see the clients, replied.

<No problems to report, sir. We have the couple here as well as the mayor. Apparently he's off work today.>

"About the vampire's abilities. The client say anything else?"

<Nothing, sir. The mayor says it's weak against sunlight like other vampires.>

"I see. Then I'm counting on you to negotiate our fees, as usual."

With a command that made it difficult to believe that he was a businessman, Cargilla quietly turned toward the coffin.

It was glowing brilliantly in the sunlight. Inscribed in red on the lid was the name 'Gerhardt von Waldstein'.

Forty-five seconds later, dozens of wooden stakes were fired and driven into the coffin.

†

The stakes, each the size of a child's forearm, were fired at the coffin in silence.

The gear the exterminators had unloaded from the vans looked like they had come straight out of a third-rate sci-fi film.

The weapon, a messy fusion of a spear gun and a bazooka, looked ostentatious enough to belong on a studio set fighting giant monsters.

The exterminators set up a simple battle formation around the coffin on the rooftop terrace.

Of course, their formation was rough and messy, each member positioned only to ensure they were not in each other's line of fire.

"All right! Fire, fire, fire! Shoot your nerves away!"

As Cargilla shouted orders, the exterminators' fingers moved expertly. It was as though they had come to their own resolutions, forgetting their fear from only moments ago.

With a watery but explosive roar, strange objects were fired from the barrels of the outlandish guns.

They were long cylinders covered in silver. The moment the cylinders hit the coffin, they trembled with a crisp explosion.

The cylinders soon fell away like spent shell casings, leaving behind white stakes where they had been earlier. The explosion was likely for boring a hole through the coffin, and the cylinders ejected the stake into the opening.

In the end, the coffin looked very much like a porcupine.

Cargilla raised an arm to signal the others to hold fire.

After several seconds of silence, a gust of wind from the mountaintops swept in. An explosion enveloped the white coffin.

Shizune Kijima looked on with eyes wide and muttered to herself.

"Incredible..."

Her utterance, spoken in Japanese, gave away a hint of both shock and admiration.

"To think they'd think of filling stakes with explosives..."

It was oddly nostalgic, like watching the death of a monster on a *tokusatsu*⁴ show from Japan.

Shizune's cold facade had been finally broken, emotion showing on her face for the first time.

"I've never seen anyone use so much force for an extermination..."

It was akin to using a nuclear bomb to kill a single alien. Shizune shook her head, a half-smile formed on her lips.

'Where do I even start?'

Until not too long ago, she had looked upon these exterminators who avoided her with disdain. But the moment this scene unfolded before her, she began to feel incredible pity for them.

The nagging feeling was always there. The team's planning was much too haphazard for a group that did this work for a living. The commander had no leadership skills to speak of. Their gear was ostentatious and absurd, even to the eyes of a Hunter.

The only reason this group had survived thus far was because they had been lucky enough to face only the weakest of vampires. Pushovers who weren't worth their name, allowing their coffins to be found despite being fatally weak against sunlight. The only thing she could commend this team for was their ability to sneak in equipment like this through customs and their guts for being able to carry out this kind of work.

That was how they had survived thus far, ignored by any vampire worth his salt.

Shizune's guess was the same as Cargilla's, but she quietly shook her head.

This must have been the extermination team's modus operandi for quite some time now.

"All right. We got it! Not even a scrap of bone!"

"Maybe we used a bit too much firepower. There's blood everywhere."

Shizune felt yet another twinge of pity for the exterminators as she watched their nonchalant chatter.

'Sooner or later all that joking's going to turn into screaming.'

She knew exactly what kind of a fate was about to befall them. She had a perfect grasp on the situation.

⁴ *Tokusatsu* is a type of live-action show in Japan that uses a great deal of special effects. The Kamen Rider series and Giant monster shows like *Gojira* are considered part of this category.

The powerful aura she had sensed earlier was bubbling up at an alarming rate.

"Oy, Camera Guy! You get all that?!"

Cargilla waved at the exterminator with the camera and smiled triumphantly.

'That was easy. Nothing out of the ordinary.'

Liberated from the tension of the mission, he used the momentum of his newfound freedom to flash his underlings a bright grin.

His eyes then wandered to Shizune, leaning against the wall separating the bedroom from the terrace.

Cargilla's unease at her presence seemed to have evaporated. He spoke to her in a joking tone.

"Sorry if you wanted that one rare, Missy. Better lick off all that blood splatter before it evaporates, now..." He began, but froze.

By the time he realized it, the world around him was silent. The other exterminators were gaping as though seeing fiction come to life.

[Danke!]

These were the words written across the stone floor.

Each and every letter was about the size of a sheet of newspaper. The words meant 'thank you' in German.

The reason the exterminators had frozen was not because the letters had not been there earlier, nor was it because the letters were rotating so that they could be read from every angle.

What terrified them was the fact that the letters were a frighteningly bright crimson, and that they were formed out of the blood that had burst forth from the exploded coffin.

The letters were not comprised of all the blood from the coffin. The rest was gathered in a neat pool at a slight distance from the letters. There was likely enough blood altogether to fill over half the coffin.

Cargilla stared, wide-eyed. Shizune did the same, albeit with a more serious look.

And as though having confirmed that all eyes were on them, the letters crawled along the floor like mercury and suddenly changed to a new set of letters.

[Thanks!]

[Merci!]

[Benefacis.]

[谢谢!]

[Grazie!]

[ありがとう!]

[Спасибо.]

[.....]

[...]

As the exterminators looked on in confusion, the letters of blood continued shifting forms.

They were all words expressing gratitude, but the exterminators were not so relaxed as to do anything but turn to Cargilla in search of salvation.

"D-don't let your guard down, you bastards! Shit! Is this a trap?! The main body must be hiding in the shadows somewhere! Get away from the blood and keep your guard up!"

And just as his voice reached the ears of everyone on the terrace, the letters of blood combined with the rest of the pool of blood, squirming like a living creature, and began moving toward the great wall between the terrace and the bedroom.

The blood seemed to pool between the wall and the floor for a moment, before defying gravity and climbing up the wall. The exterminators watched, frozen in shock as it laid out a long sentence in English.

[My apologies. As I note that the leader of your group speaks perfect English, I shall also continue in that very language!]

The blood from the coffin formed letters of an elegant handwriting on the wall. The supernatural display left the exterminators lost for words, but the blood ignored their shock and used the great white wall as a canvas to create words upon it with its own body.

[Thank you! You have my sincere gratitude. No words of thanks could ever be enough to quell my appreciation! I'd have expired if I had been trapped in that dark coffin much longer! Thank you for this most blessed chance to see sunlight once more, Lord God! Devil! And you good Saints, who have freed me from this coffin of mine!]

The blood even made sure to use exclamation marks in its quest to make its gratitude known. Cargilla and the others had no idea why the blood was calling them Saints, but perhaps it was referring to the fragments of the stakes that were lying on the floor.

Realizing the gravity of the situation, Cargilla mustered all the gall he could and roared at his fellow exterminators.

"This is bad! The main body must be around somewhere! Find the thing controlling all this blood!"

And as though in an attempt to correct him, the letters of blood on the wall changed form once again.

[What is this, my dear friends? I am right here, am I not? This blood is myself, in the flesh! I am the blood, and this blood is all of me!]

The letters of blood emphasized their autonomy, taking care to use even apostrophes and commas.

"What...?"

As Cargilla gaped in shock, the letters of blood added an explanation.

[Whether you believe me or not, if you wish to communicate with this body of mine, I'm afraid you will have to speak up. I consider it most unfortunate that I have no telepathic abilities.]

"What is this... No one said anything about this. The hell...?"

Cargilla looked back at his underlings as though asking for help. The pride with which he had carried himself in the immediate aftermath of the explosion was nowhere to be found. He was laughing weakly, his tone uncertain at best and foolish at worst.

[Ah, please. I am willing to answer any questions, so don't hesitate to ask. My name is Gerhardt von Waldstein! I am a viscount, the former Lord of the island of Growerth, and currently a vampire living in hiding!]

"A vampire..."

[But it could only have been that you good Saints knew of this beforehand that you have driven wooden stakes into my coffin, is it not? From the state of the coffin, I surmise that the stakes you used were not merely what they appeared, but in any event, I am indeed a vampire. Please put yourselves at ease. I understand that this form of mine is nothing natural, but there is no need to delve much further in that direction.]

The exterminators looked around at one another, unsure as to how they should reply to the red letters.

Noting the silence, the self-proclaimed viscount by the name of Gerhardt collapsed the letters on the wall, and wrote up another page's worth of words on it once more.

[I suppose an expression of thanks is in order. If the valuables in the castle sanctum will satisfy you, then please help yourselves! Though my humble abode may not rival the spectacle of Hohenzollern Castle, graced by His Imperial Majesty himself, I guarantee that I am more than their match in grace. Antiques, paintings, whatever may strike your fancy is yours! But of course, it would be much too boorish to express my thanks only by the gift of

material goods. This good deed shall be repaid with another, if you please, so call on me should you ever find yourselves in need of assistance!]

The dramatically archaic way of speech made it seem to Cargilla and the others that the letters were speaking in a haughty tone. As they slowly went over the meaning of the words, the exterminators looked around at one another, at a loss.

However, one person among them refused to be silenced.

The Asian girl stepped forward. The words on the wall trembled as though observing her.

"You are Gerhardt von Waldstein, correct?"

[Yes, indeed.]

Shizune's 'You' was enough to tell the Viscount that the young woman was Japanese. The actions that followed were exceedingly quick; changing the rest of his words into Japanese, he wrote out another set of words on the lower left section of the wall, right before her.

[Ah, a beautiful young lady hailing from Japan, presumably. You alone seem to be unfazed by this body. So what is it that you seek? This One would like to assure you, This One shall do whatever is in This One's power to assist you.]

The moment those words came up on the wall, Shizune quietly looked up.

From the looks of her face, it seemed like she was holding back great anger and rage. But more than that was apparent a sense of expectation and excitement about the being before her.

But aside from that expectant look, her face was devoid of emotion. It was empty, as though she did not look to derive any enjoyment from her anticipation.

[Hm...]

As the viscount converted even his exclamations into Japanese, Shizune uttered five words.

"I want to eat you."

The moment she spoke, she disappeared from sight.

"Wha-"

In the second it took for Cargilla to draw breath, Shizune had leapt up into the air.

For a moment it looked as though she had clung onto the wall, but in the next she launched herself forward. Her fingers were grasping the edge of the castle rooftop.

"Um... Wh-what was that, sir? ...A monster?"

The newbie Val's eyes were even wider than when he had first witnessed the letters of blood. He was already beyond anxiety or nervousness, now on the verge of full-on terror.

"Which one? The blood, or the girl?"

Val thought for a moment, and mumbled.

"...I wonder."

The others seemed to have only now noticed that Shizune was gone, looking around wildly to catch a glimpse of her.

Shizune herself, meanwhile, oriented herself downwards like a spider. Taking three test tubes from her side, she lobbed them at the pool of blood and the letters on the wall underneath her.

As the test tubes fell, they hit a protrusion near the middle of the wall and broke. From each spilled out a different substance—two of them were liquids, and the last some sort of a white powder.

The pool of blood underneath expertly avoided the substances that scattered randomly from overhead. The blood underneath the shower of liquid and powder escaped only the precise areas hit by the substances. It was rather like watching water spill over a drop of wax on a piece of paper.

Several of the exterminators looked at the liquid substances. One of them was clear, with no scent or fumes to speak of.

The other was a mysterious substance that shone silvery-white. It retained a circular form on the section of rooftop it had landed on, trembling slightly like a drop of water on a raincoat.

"Liquid silver...?" One of the exterminators wondered. The letters on the wall squirmed once more, expressing its astonishment.

[My goodness, is the young lady per chance going by the myth that vampires are weakened by silver? Not an entirely untrue story, but I would like to advise you that liquid silver is in fact mercury, a different element altogether.]

"Try telling *her*..."

[Oh? Was the young lady not one of you good Saints? Please pardon the error. I meant nothing by it.]

A moment after the apology was written out, the pool of blood suddenly rose up.

The mass of blood twisted and churned like a whirlpool, then leapt onto the roof, flying over Shizune's head.

The moment one end of the twister touched the surface of the roof, it pulled in the rest of its body as though it were a root drawing in everything like a spring.

Shizune also followed after it and threw herself onto the roof.

"Huh?"

The exterminators were all rooted to their spots, struck dumb by the scene that had unfolded before them. But Val soon broke their silence.

"Uh, so the blood and the girl both disappeared. What do we do now?"

His awkward question snapped the others back to reality one by one.

Before them was a pristine white stone wall.

Behind them was a white coffin, smashed to pieces.

Cargilla looked back and forth between them, then turned to the exterminator with the Handycam.

"How much did you get?"

"All of it, sir.."

"Get rid of that second half."

"Huh?" The cameraman blurted in confusion. Cargilla twisted his lips into a grin, though the rest of his face did not join in the smile.

"Just cut it off at the part where we blew up the coffin. We'll hand that video over to the client. We're getting off this island before sundown, even if it means leaving with chump change. Any objections?"

The exterminators looked around at one another once more and waited for Cargilla.

"No objections, then. All right. Let's get outta—let's go."

Cargilla left the castle quicker than anyone, his underlings following after him. Remembering the terrifying scene from earlier, he shivered and silently thanked the exterminators for following without a fuss.

He was truly grateful for the fact that no one had said 'Let's follow after it!'.

'Damn. Good thing these bastards have no sense of timing.'

"Uh, maybe we should go help heaaaarghh..."

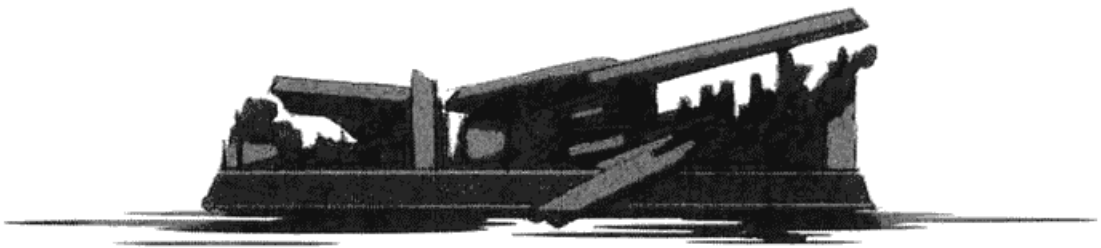
Cargilla slammed the back of his hand into Val's face before he could finish his sentence.

"You say something?"

"...Nothinggg, sirrr..."

2章

棺の回りの吸血鬼



Chapter 2: The Vampires Around the Coffin

Waldstein Castle rooftop.

Once the exterminators had departed, the only ones left in the majestic castle were the vampire viscount and the Japanese Eater.

As the sun shone brilliantly over them, Shizune stood with dusk at her back, her eyes fixed on the pool of blood on the roof.

[Ah, I did find it strange that there were no people going to and fro in the castle—but to think entry had been restricted all this time. How scrupulous of those good Saints.]

Despite the tension running through the air, the pool of blood continued to form letters at a consistent pace.

"Are you really Gerhardt von Waldstein?" Shizune asked for confirmation. The letters re-formed themselves confidently.

[Dear lady, you have the wrong man!]

"You just told me you were him earlier. Why are you denying it now?"

[It is most unfortunate that you could not respond to my jest in kind, young lady.]

This time, the letters were formed in midair instead of the surface of the wall.

[Now... presumably, what you threw at This One earlier was holy water and mercury, and perhaps salt or ashes of burnt wood. This One is terribly sorry to inform you that none of those substances will do This One any harm. Desiccants, perhaps, but salt and silver are no weaknesses of This One's.]

With a sidelong glance at the words floating in the air, Shizune reached behind her white leather jacket. For some odd reason, there were countless knives and forks holstered there like weaponry. It would not be surprising if an attack with something like a fruit knife were to be deflected on the rows of cutlery alone.

Drawing multiple forks at once, Shizune lobbed them at the pool of blood at bullet-speed.

[Your efforts are wasted, young lady.]

Several knives tore through the joking words and drove themselves through the pool of blood. Naturally, they were not driven into the liquid itself—they had been nailed into the rooftop.

[Hm?]

The viscount realized something only a moment later. The handles of the cutlery were unusually thick, looking more like they belonged on tools like chisels.

Not a second later, sparks flew from the tips of the forks. The pool of blood began to boil.

[A stun gun of some sort. Never did This One expect that these weapons of yours might have currents running through them.]

The words floating in the air addressed Shizune as though the vampire had been less than affected by the shock. The blood pooled on the rooftop slid away from the spots where the cutlery had been driven into, cutting its boiling short.

[It is truly unfortunate, but This One is resistant to electric shocks as well. And to advise you further before you waste any more of your efforts, this body is also impervious to flames.]

"Thanks for the tip. You're pretty considerate for a monster." Shizune said, glaring at the pool of blood that was twitching like an amoeba. "I've already eaten a few vampires that could turn into fog, but I've never seen one that could liquify itself."

Hearing this, the viscount formed yet more words in midair. The lines floating in the air twisted and bent like thin metal wire, creating new shapes.

[Ah, judging from the situation earlier, and your reaction time—which, according to This One's humble observations, surpasses even those of vampires—This One must presume that you are an Eater (食鬼人), correct? Would this also mean that you are not affiliated with any religious exorcist groups?]

"...Thanks for taking the time to write out the *kanji*, too."

'Never thought he'd even write out the word "Eater" in Japanese.'

Shizune shrugged awkwardly, and drew even more knives and forks from her arsenal.

[And if you would allow This One to add: it seems you are under the mistaken impression that This One possesses an ability similar to that of other vampires—namely, turning oneself into liquid form as they do with fog. But this is indeed This One's true form, and to expand on that fact, This One cannot take on human form.]

Although Shizune was by no means obliged to continue reading the viscount's words, she found herself glancing at the letters of blood as she brainstormed for her next course of action. The moment she took in the meaning behind the viscount's claim, she frowned and responded to him.

"...Then you don't have a human shape?"

[This is indeed This One's own body in the flesh. The very picture of a man in his prime, is it not?]

Shizune was put on edge by the act of conversing with a silent pool of blood, but her brain continued to send adrenaline rushing through her body, allowing her to quickly adjust to this unfamiliar situation.

Taking a moment to observe the full form of the pool of blood, she addressed the letters in the air once more.

"I see... You're unusual all right, but I'm not interested in any of that."

Shizune twirled the table knife she was holding, and decided to play along with the viscount.

"Though I *am* interested in finding out how you'll taste."

[My word, what boldness for a young lady!]

The letters were laughing.

They did not create any sound that suggested so, but the letters were trembling slightly in a way that told Shizune that he was chuckling as he spoke. Or, to be specific, her brain forcibly came to understand his actions.

The archaic form of speech the vampire used made it almost feel as though she was speaking to a fellow Japanese. As she found herself being drawn into the viscount's pace, Shizune realized that the vampire before her was rather unusual for one of its kind.

All kinds of vampires existed in this world.

Some could turn wholly invisible. Others could synchronize with sand, teleport, create copies of themselves, or control fire. It was a range of abilities one might expect to find in a pulp ninja novel, but such powers actually belonged to some of the more unusual vampires she had encountered in the past.

And despite the fact that she had personally eaten such vampires, the self-proclaimed viscount before her was somehow different from the others she had faced. It was not his abilities or appearance that set him apart, but the obscured-but-present scent of humanity in him.

Normally, Shizune would not have given such thoughts any consideration. But things were different today.

The pool of blood did not falter for even a moment, continuing to create more words.

[However, This One must say that—]

"Stop talking in the third person. Are you making fun of me?" Shizune demanded, twirling her knife once more.

It was a rather fantastic scene to behold, but neither party seemed to be having much trouble in communicating with one another.

[Ah, my apologies! I'd thought that I had reached some level of proficiency with the Japanese language, but I fear some of the finer nuances of the art still manage to escape Th-ah, apologies—One(*ware*[余]⁵).]

"Try again."

[Then We(*chin* [朕]⁶)]

⁵ *Ware* is a rarely-used first-person pronoun with a very dignified tone.

⁶ *Chin* is a first-person pronoun analogous with the royal 'we'.

"You're doing that on purpose, aren't you?"

Narrowing her already sharp eyes, Shizune fixed her grip on the knife she was twirling. Noticing this, the viscount hurriedly rearranged himself.

[Pardon my rudeness, most beautiful lady! I was merely compelled to jest by your astonishing radiance. I am doing everything in my power to prove that you intend no aggression to my person, but it does not seem to be working.]

"Thanks for the compliment, but I'm not letting you off that easily."

If the compliment had been from anyone else, Shizune might have been able to appreciate it. But she felt nothing at the comment from the vampire—her enemy. Taking his words as provocation, Shizune slowly went silent.

Vampires were her enemies, responsible for her family's death. This was the first time she had conversed so long with one of his kind, despite the unconventional medium of their communication.

Perhaps the vampire's form, more slime than humanoid, had led her to unconsciously lower her guard.

'But vampires are vampires. The ones who slaughtered my family. They stole my happiness. And now, they're my prey.'

Shizune calmly began to unleash her bloodlust.

The viscount, keeping up with the change in atmosphere, formed a new set of words in the air.

[Wait a moment! I have neither duty, motivation, nor time to face you today. And if you have the power to defeat me at all, then I do not believe eating my body will enhance your abilities any further.]

"That doesn't matter. The fact that you're a vampire is reason enough for me."

[I ask that you listen to what I have to say. I do not drink blood, I have not murdered anyone on this island, and I do not impose my will upon those who live here. And above all, how could I possibly sink my fangs into a lady's neck with a body like this?]

The viscount's form had indeed aroused Shizune's curiosity. Even if vampires who did not have to drink blood existed, how could this particular being derive any sort of energy?

But even if the viscount was telling the truth, it meant nothing to Shizune.

"Whether you're good or evil has nothing to do with the fact that I'm going to eat you."

Shizune's bloodlust did not abate in the least. The pool of blood quietly replied,

[Is this because of some duty? For example... have you been hired to murder me?]

Shizune glanced at him and shook her head.

"No, this is personal."

[Ah, you do indeed seem to be driven by a great resolution of will... Vengeance, I presume?]

Shizune looked uncomfortable for a moment, before shooting back with an irrelevant question.

"Why do you go to the trouble of adding in ellipses? And it's not like you even have to write out all your 'Ah's, either."

However, the viscount's response to her rude tone was unchangingly polite.

[Ah, excuse me. My goodness, not again... I am sincerely apologetic, young lady. To me, the act of creating these letters and words feels no different from the act of speaking. Instead of the sensation of a voice escaping my mouth, whatever comes up in my mind becomes these letters of blood you see before you. It seems that my brain—ah, perhaps I should call it a *soul*, in my case—is converting my words into letters for my convenience. They say that if a human being were to wear a pair of glasses that show the world upside-down for three days, his brain would adjust to the new way of sight by the end of that period. It works in much the same way for myself.]

Shizune found herself raising an eyebrow at that statement.

"A vampire like you? A soul? Don't make me laugh."

There was silence.

The viscount's form froze in place. A breeze blew between him and the quiet Shizune.

After a moment, the viscount began to write in a fashion that made it seem as though he was choosing his words very carefully.

[...Hah hah hah. You say that we vampires are soulless creatures? Not an entirely unfounded belief, and in one sense absolutely true.] He said, deliberation clear in his tone, continuing before Shizune could interrupt. [How much do you know about vampires? I grant you that you must have acquired a great deal of knowledge about our abilities and characteristics. But have you never thought it strange that each individual could possess abilities and weaknesses so different from the next?]

'Never.'

To Shizune, vampires were prey—nothing but targets of her gluttony, and earlier, vengeance. In the early years of her time as an Eater, when she was driven by revenge alone, she had strived to learn as many of their weaknesses as she possibly could. But by the time she had gotten strong enough to defeat a vampire in single combat, she no longer cared. There were many reasons for her disinterest, but one of them was the fact that she no longer needed to know a given vampire's weakness in order to overpower it.

At this point, a vampire's weaknesses were nothing more than an agent of efficiency by which she could conclude her battles faster. She never made the effort to look into them any more than necessary, nor did she ever intend to do so.

But it was not as though the words of the pool of blood before her were entirely uninteresting to her. In fact, they aroused her curiosity so much that she almost wanted to

start asking questions of him. She never would have been swayed so much if the vampire had been writing in English, but seeing her native language again softened her heart.

If she was still stuck in the mindset of revenge, Shizune would never have given the slightest attention to the viscount's claims, nor would she have had the composure to do so.

But now, this topic of discussion was not entirely without favor towards her.

Being an Eater, who ate the flesh and blood of vampires to absorb their power, not knowing anything about her prey meant she would never be able to properly express in words the kind of being she was.

She closed her eyes for a moment in thought, then spun her knife around once more and holstered it behind her jacket.

"...Talk. I might even save you for later if you manage to entertain me."

[Thank you for your consideration, good lady.]

†

In the darkness.

What kind of vampires were my real parents?

Father would always say, *[They were the most admirable of vampires. I am proud to count myself among their friends, and I promise you that you may carry yourself with that same pride for having been born their son]*. But he never told me anything specific about them.

Why was I born a vampire? I don't dislike the fact that I am one, but I've always wondered.

Father taught me all sorts of things about vampires. Apparently there are countless varieties around the world, and about half of us don't even need to drink people's blood to live. Father is one of them. But that was only after he took on that liquid form he has now.

I'm the type that needs to drink blood regularly to survive.

Whether it's from a human or an animal, I need the blood of a living creature, or else I lose my strength. It's a separate need from hunger. It's not like I'm affected physically, but if I go for a long time without blood—months at a time—it starts to feel like my consciousness is growing further away from my body.

Some vampires have a shorter cycle of hunger than others. I've heard that some of them have to drink at least one human's worth a day. Though those types usually get hunted down quickly.

Father told me, *[The act of sucking blood is not quite so simple as merely drinking someone's blood. It is an act of sharing your very soul. Relic, my son, should you choose the path of intermingling with humans, you must never think of drinking blood as an act of 'taking'. Remember that, by sucking someone's blood, you are sharing your life and soul]*

with them]. But to be honest, that's not easy. In the end, I'm just acting on my desire to drink someone's blood, aren't I?

When I sink my fangs into someone's neck and suck out their blood, I get the feeling that something is escaping my body and is being drained into the person I'm biting. I think if I try to focus on that sensation more and practice, I'll eventually be able to subjugate someone, or even turn them. Although I've never actually tried.

Turning someone—to drag a human being, so different from me, into the world of vampires... In movies and novels, it's as easy as spreading a plague. Entire villages get turned overnight. According to Father, I have the power to do that myself. He says that, physically speaking, I'm as close as anyone can get to those vampires you see in movies.

I can turn any human I choose into a vampire. Ferret said it was like helping the human 'evolve' or something, but I honestly don't feel that way.

How could you call it evolution when the newer form has so many more weaknesses?

According to Father's knowledge, about 80% of vampires are weak against sunlight. The weakest of them can't so much as twitch while the sun's still up, and apparently many of them are killed by humans during the day.

I can just barely move during the day, but that's only indoors. I'd probably disintegrate to ashes if sunlight hits me, and my powers weaken noticeably after the rooster's first crow.

I hate the smell of garlic, and I can't stand purified salt or silver. I'd probably die if someone drove a stake through my heart. I might be able to revive from my ashes with someone's help, or with centuries' worth of effort, but I'm too scared to even think of trying.

I can't enter running water. I can cross it on ships and airplanes, but I can't go into it physically.

A vampire's energy apparently leaks out into water. It's possible to absorb it back from still pools, but you can't get it back from a flowing stream.

That means that I can't shower—I have to bathe. Thankfully I don't sweat too much or get messy easily, but on days I get covered with sand or something, I honestly don't know what to do.

I guess about the one thing that I'm fine with is crucifixes. But then again, almost no vampires are weak against them. Although a lot of us are weak against the powers of the believers who wield them...

I can do most of the things people might expect from a vampire. Other than those weaknesses, I can survive anything. I can turn into a flock of bats, control familiars, turn into fog, hide in shadows, move things telekinetically, and hypnotize people with a single look. And as for less well-known powers, I can turn into a snake or a swarm of mosquitoes. Although I almost never do that because it never gets a good reaction.

I think I'm physically stronger than other kids my age, but to be honest, I've never actually tested that or anything.

My body is still growing. I eat food like humans do. But once I hit twenty or so, I'll stop aging completely.

But I still don't like the fact that I have so many weaknesses. Whenever I want to wash my hands, I have to pour water into a basin. If I put my hands under a tap, they'll burn like I'm holding them in fire.

And as for sunlight—although I've heard that a lot of humans started going without it since computers and the internet became popular—I prefer the outdoors. I can't stand the way things are. This might sound a bit cheesy, but I wish I could play football with all the other kids my age. We don't have any fields with lighting equipment on Growerth. ...Well, I guess that's just an excuse. It's painful, not being able to walk under sunlight. People might think it's just like reversing your sense of day and night, but it's not like humans turn to ash when they step out in the evening, is it?

Well, getting back on topic... In other words, my balance of strengths and weaknesses isn't that convenient. I don't really mind because I've been this way since the day I was born, but if a human were to turn into a vampire, I'm sure they'd be surprised at all the weaknesses they'll have to live with.

In that sense, I'm really jealous of my sister.

Ferret is my total opposite. She has no weaknesses at all. She's completely fine under sunlight. She can eat garlic, take showers, and swim in rivers and oceans. She tries not to do that in front of me so I won't have to feel bad, although it's not like I mind.

She's not affected by silver, and crucifixes go without saying. No one's ever tried, but she might even be able to survive a stake to the heart.

But Ferret doesn't have most of the powers I have. She can regenerate quickly, but she doesn't have any other abilities. She can't turn into bats or fog, she can't communicate with mice and bats, she can't move things with her mind, and she can't hypnotize people.

Ferret can go without drinking blood, though. She could drink it if she wanted to, and she could probably subjugate someone by biting them, to a certain extent, but... I don't think she'd be able to turn someone.

That's how we're like mirror images of one another. Our personalities are different, too.

I really love my sister, but sometimes I wonder:

What in the world are we?

Not just vampires. I feel like we're abnormal even for our kind.

Me, born with most vampire characteristics, and Ferret, born with no weaknesses. Who were our parents? Do our physical strength and powers mean something special?

I've wondered about this once in a while, but I never brought it up to Father. It feels like if I tell him, I'll lose the happiness we have together now.

I might end up resenting myself for being so curious to know. I might end up hating my own little sister.

That's what scares me.

The basement of the harbor office.

Hearing the footsteps descending the stairs, the vampire siblings opened their eyes in unison.

'Was I dreaming?'

Still feeling drowsy, Relic began to put his thoughts in order.

Of the girls he had met in Japan, he got along best with the older girl he met in Yokohama on that final day. He ended up telling her all kinds of things he never would have said normally.

'I never got to drink her blood, but I bet it would have been delicious.'

Falling back into his memories for a moment, Relic focused again on his hearing.

He could hear two sets of footsteps. They did not seem to belong to the two workmen Ferret had threatened earlier.

Quietly returning his focus to the reality before him, Relic began comparing the sound of the footsteps to those in his memories.

The sounds matched up with his memories like sets of fingerprints—they were identical to those of a pair of siblings, like himself and Ferret but with a few differences.

The voice that echoed from the staircase confirmed his suspicions.

"...See? I told you! Relic and Ferret must be here!"

'Is that Hilda?'

Relic tensed unnecessarily at his childhood friend's voice. He did not hear any voices from the second set of footsteps, but Hilda was likely accompanied by her brother Michael.

'How did they find us? We were going to go see them ourselves!'

Relic's heart, normally quiet and sluggish, began beating at nearly-human speed. Even vampires who did not need to breathe had a heartbeat, because their bodies still needed a supply of nutrients and energy.

They were just like humans in that their heartbeat quickened when they were excited. Relic's thoughts floundered further as he scrambled to figure out how he should greet his approaching childhood friend.

'Argh, this isn't good. If Michael's here too, Ferret's going to go crazy.'

Relic wondered if he should open the lid of his coffin to avoid such a situation. But,

"Ferre—"

The moment he thought he heard an excitable male voice, Relic heard Ferret's coffin lid slam open, and the sound of someone being smacked mercilessly.

He had an idea of what was going on outside.

Hilda's older brother Michael had probably attempted to leap into Ferret's coffin, only to be rewarded with a punch.

Michael comically spun into the wall.

"Michael!"

Naturally, the one calling his name was not Ferret, but Michael's sister Hilda.

'I wish my sister would call me by name, too.' Relic thought to himself, as he listened to Ferret's desperate attempt to hold back her outrage.

"You...! I-impudent...!"

Though she lashed out at Michael, who was still rolling on the floor, her girlish voice took away much of the dignity from her words.

"Your voice is pretty even when you're angry, Ferret."

Although his jaw and back must have been in pain, Michael got up exuberantly and flashed a smile at Ferret.

It was clear that Ferret had been holding back when she punched Michael. His neck would have done a 180 if she had gone all-out against him.

Whether or not he understood this, Michael got up and extended a hand to her.

"Welcome back, Ferret! You must've been so lonely without me. But don't worry. Everything's going to be all right now!"

"How..."

Ferret trailed off, driven to silence by Michael's boldness.

Relic snickered quietly from inside his coffin as he listened to the commotion outside.

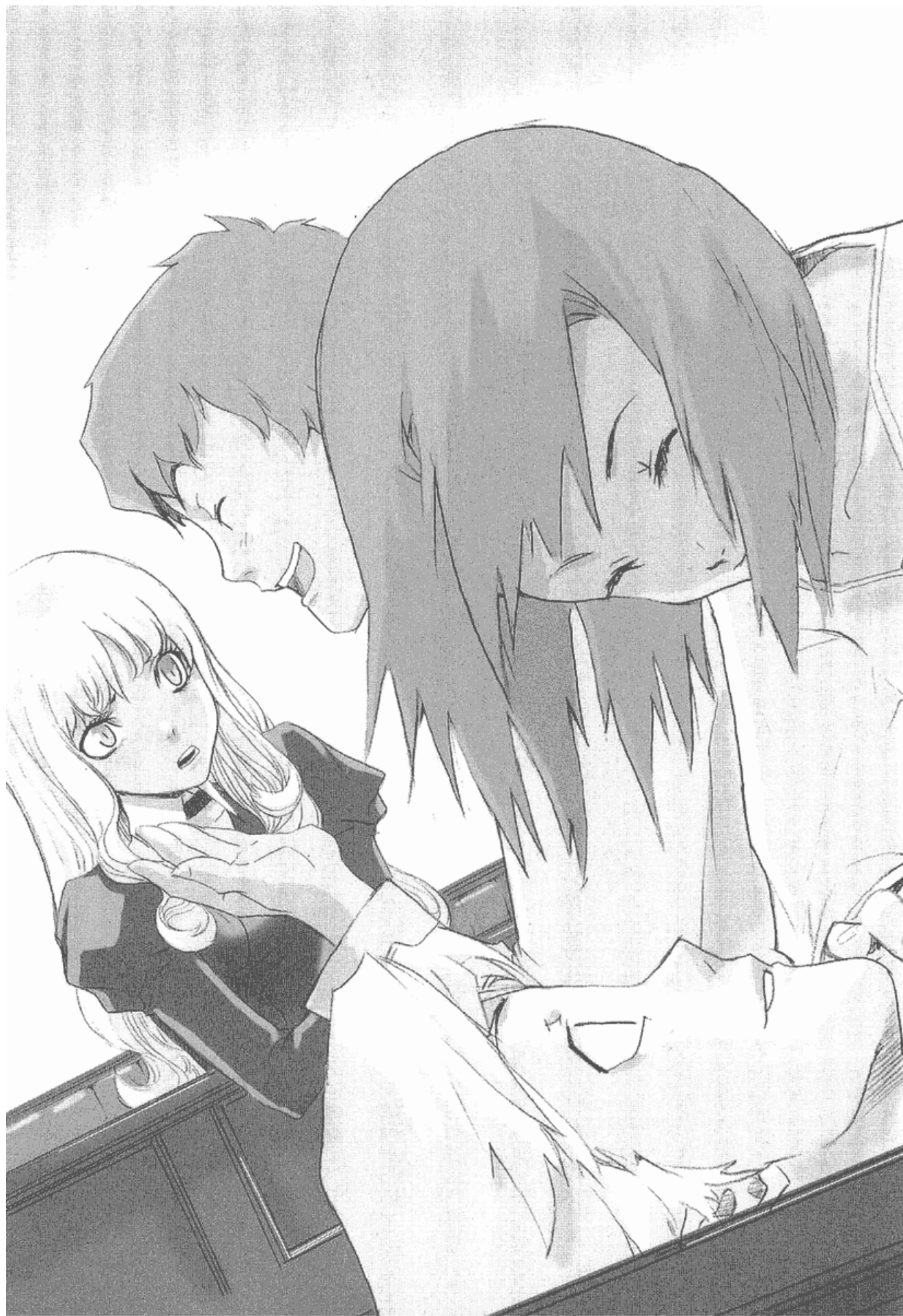
'Michael hasn't changed a bit, huh. I guess that's only natural, since it's only been a year.'

After a good laugh, Relic made up his mind and opened his eyes, slowly pushing up the lid of his coffin.

The fluorescent light seeped into his eyes, nearly blinding him. But the light was suddenly cut off.

Relic pushed the lid open all the way. The shadow blocking the light greeted him.

"Welcome back, Relic!"



Standing before him was the human girl named Hilda. Relic bowed his head for a moment at the sight of his childhood friend's face, then laughed sheepishly and responded to her smile with one of his own.

"I missed you."

†

The outskirts of the city of Rukram, on the island of Growerth.

"Is this really okay?"

Cargilla and the others had retreated from the castle, having accomplished nothing. Val mumbled uncomfortably as they sat in their vans.

"Course it is! Listen up, our clients and the mayor were the ones who told us it was weak against daylight. There shouldn't be a problem here. We destroyed the coffin under the sun, so we've done our job."

They had arrived at a small manor in the forest, a little ways from the city. It was the clients' home. The exterminators all got off the vans.

The house stood in beautiful harmony with the trees in the forest. It was rather small for a manor, but if the report about it housing a family of four was true, the home looked almost too big for the number of its inhabitants.

"Is this really going to get us any money?"

"...Normally we'd bring back the vampire's ashes or the bite mark on the victim's neck would disappear as proof. But we should be fine as long as we have that video. We have records about their dealing with us, so worst case scenario, we can tell 'em we'll sell their info to the media if they don't pay up."

"That's basically extortion—Gah!"

Val received another punch to the nose for his comment.

The series of unusual events that day left Cargilla quite rattled. Normally he would at least contact the head office, but this time he was driven solely by the desire to leave Growerth as soon as possible.

In fact, he didn't even care about the money—he just wanted to join up with his second-in-command's team and escape the island.

"I called 'em on the radio before we came here, so everything should be fine. But..."

Worrying that the client might confuse him for a burglar because of his appearance, Cargilla pressed the doorbell.

Seconds passed. A caucasian couple opened the door.

"Oh... You would be Mr. Cargilla... from the extermination team?"

The wife asked hesitantly. Cargilla forced himself to put on a sort of smile that Val the newbie had never seen before.

"Good day, ma'am! We're just coming back from taking care of your pest problem."

†

"Oh my goodness... Thank you so much!"

The exterminators were led into the parlor. They had filled the room and were forced to remain standing. Cargilla had insisted that the others stay outside in the cars, but the couple insisted in turn that they thank each and every member of the team.

Cargilla would have much preferred to forget their thanks and leave, but he was not eloquent enough to turn them down and eventually surrendered, bringing everyone inside.

"I smell a trap here, sir. This has *got* to be a trick!" Val hissed to the end, but Cargilla snorted.

"It's fine. We can leave those bloody letters to the Eater. And even if this couple is working for those letters, this is the middle of the day. One sunlight bomb is all we need."

"But that viscount or whatever was totally fine."

"Uh..."

"I seriously don't like how things are going. Don't you think maybe there's a whole swarm of vampires who aren't weak to sunlight?"

The newbie was making a valid point. But Cargilla was here on a mission. He couldn't back out now.

"I'll keep an eye out. And if you're right, we're going to run like hell." Cargilla said, shaking his head.

'How'd this guy ever become a leader?!' Val wondered, and discreetly positioned himself close to the exit.

Cargilla had been given leadership because of the vast amount of experience he had. But in the end, he only had experience in facing off against small fry. He had never been involved in such an unusual situation before.

"Sir." Cargilla's second-in-command, who had arrived earlier, spoke up. "I don't know why you're so on edge right now, but if there's something going on... would you like the three of us to go and start the cars outside?"

"G-good idea! I might be being paranoid here, but go make sure we can get outta here as soon as we can."

"Right, sir."

The second-in-command and the two others still had no idea about the self-proclaimed viscount. They left the manor, looking very confused about Cargilla's state of half-panic. Sending them off, Cargilla desperately swallowed the truth and put on a fake smile once more.

†

Doing his best to keep his sweaty palms concealed, Cargilla made small talk with the couple. He wanted to end the discussion as soon as possible, but he was not so well versed in conversation that he could lead them in the direction he wanted.

"We were terrified. The vampire had its sights on our children."

"Of course."

Cargilla had been so focused on leaving the island that he failed to notice two terrifying facts.

One was that the couple had accepted his claim of the vampire's extermination too easily. The other was the fact that the mayor that his second-in-command mentioned meeting alongside the couple was nowhere to be seen.

"We've been troubled by this 'viscount' for the past ten years. At first we were hired to homeschool the two children."

"Right... ..Huh?"

'What's this woman talking about? ...Wait a second.'

This was when he finally realized that something was off.

'They've known the viscount for ten years? Didn't the report say differently? And if they've known him that long, they'd already know that he's immune to sunlight. Shit... And now that I think about it, where's that mayor who told us he was weak against sunlight in the first place?'

"We were both teachers back when we lived in Britain. So he asked us to give the vampire children a junior school-level education."

'Wait, what? Vampire children? No one mentioned them before!'

Alarm bells were going off in Cargilla's head. He glanced back at the other exterminators, but they were all looking around at one another, their faces rigid. Val was already positioning himself near the door.

"Uh, wait, what do you mean, 'vampire children'? We only heard about the one vampire..."

"That's right. We never told you about them. The mayor said we shouldn't. The children left the island about a year ago, and we intended to get rid of that viscount while they were away. But that's when the mayor came, and... oh, yes. The viscount is quite popular with the people of this island. Much more than any mayor..."

'Huh? What's this woman saying?'

"Oh? Didn't we mention this before? Most of the humans on this island know. It's practically public knowledge among the people here. The vampires, I mean. About the viscount and the countless vampires around him. The vampire children left on a journey without a destination. Along with all the familiars in their castle. The mayor calls the viscount a count. Our two children are absolutely lovely. The vampire children are twins—a boy and a girl. The mayor is very young. He's already in his thirties, but he doesn't look a day over twenty. The viscount's familiars include werewolves, witches, and vampire women in green, and they might be able to overpower a small country's army. The vampire children are very quick to learn. If they could join in with human children, I'm sure they could attend excellent universities."

Coherence began draining from the woman's words. Sentences followed after one another without clear connections. She continued eerily like a broken doll. Now that Cargilla thought about it, the wife was the only one who had been speaking for some time. The husband was merely watching with a smile plastered over his face.

"Have a nice day, ma'am."

At this point, his sense of caution overpowered his devotion to his job. Cargilla got off his seat without even feigning politeness. The other exterminators seemed to have also come to the same conclusion, heading for the doors one after another.

"Oh my, it's getting late. Looks like I'll have to turn on the lights." The woman said, oblivious to the exterminators' movement, and reached over to the light switch.

The lights came on in the room. At the same time, the shutters in the house loudly began to close by themselves.

"WHOOAAAAAAA!"

The exterminators rushed towards the doors like a flood. But Val stood at the doorway.

For some reason, his arms were wide open, as though he were blocking their way.

"Come on, kid! We're getting outta here!"

"The hell's wrong with you, newbie?! Get outta the way!"

With a battle cry, the exterminators attempted to tackle Val out of the way.

However, they were flung back by an invisible force, hurled into the other exterminators and falling to the floor.

"O-oy. Newbie?" Cargilla gaped, coming to the scene a second later.

"Sorry about that. I might have overdone it a little."

The newbie's nervous tone was nowhere to be found. He was now speaking to them with sympathy, as though he was looking down upon lesser creatures.

"Man, how the hell did *you* get to be leader? Who tries to finish the job without even talking to the client? Honestly... you've got no idea how badly you messed up my amazing plan."

Several people tried to ignore him and leave, but they were obstructed by an invisible force. In contrast to their fear and confusion, Val showed off an air of composure only granted to those with superiority.

"Jeez, Boss. You were actually right, you know? What was it now... Yes, it's true that most vampires are weakened by daylight. But the ones who let you find their coffins are the weaklings. Real weaklings. Lowest of the lowest of the lowest of the low."

Val gave him a simple explanation about vampires, in a tone straight out of a practiced skit.

"Listen, Boss. *Really* strong vampires would never get reported. In fact, no one would even notice them. The citizens, the people living around them, none of them will ever figure it out. Isn't that what it means for a vampire to subjugate someone?"

"Who... the hell... are you?" Cargilla hissed, his voice growing fainter by the second. Val shook his head and snickered.

"I. Told. You. I've been telling you all this time. You never know if there might be vampires who're totally immune to sunlight."

'Can't be. No way...'

Cargilla's suspicions were basically confirmed at this point, but he could not bring himself to believe them. He did not want to believe them.

It was not because he had faith in the new exterminator. It was because acknowledging that fact meant acknowledging the peril his life was currently in.

But Val mercilessly announced the truth.

"A vampire who's immune to sunlight. That's right, like *me*."

Val's body suddenly inflated like a balloon.

"Let me introduce myself again. You see, there's something like a gathering of vampires in the world. And I'm a newbie there, too. Valdred, at your service. Please call me Vaaaaaa—"

The rest of his sentence was interrupted by the sudden inflation of his neck.

It was like watching a plant grow in fast motion. Flesh erupted from inside Val's swaying body, swallowing up his clothes and creating new fabric on the surface of his body.

"Hey... Hold it. You're not a vampire! There's no way in hell you are!" Cargilla cried, unable to accept the outlandish scene unfolding before his eyes.

Appearing before the exterminators was the form of a gigantic man, his face covered by a beard that made him look much like a barbarian.

The giant who had been Val addressed Cargilla and the others in an entirely different tone.

"S'ppose I should take care 'a you lot."

The exterminators began running back the way they came back in utter confusion. Their not-so-small stock of weaponry was still back in the cars. Cargilla had concealed a handgun in his clothing just in case, but as soon as he pulled it out, an invisible force took hold of it and drew it into the giant's hand.

"Shit..."

Just as Cargilla turned aside, a loud noise echoed through the manor.

'The doorbell! The others must be here to see what's going on!'

Clinging to a ray of hope, Cargilla turned towards the door. The giant also did the same, slowly and without caring for his gun.

But was the addition of three men going to turn the tide for him? Cargilla was uncertain for a moment, before coming to a realization.

'Wait. The others were here for ages before we arrived. So how'd they not notice that something was off about the couple?'

As his emotions fluctuated dramatically, Cargilla found his fear rearing its head once more.

He ignored the bell (even if he wanted to get to the door, the giant was blocking it) and turned around to head for the back door. At that precise moment, the fear that had been quietly pushing down at his shoulders took material form.

The other exterminators, who should have left before him, were all collapsed in the hallway.

Some were clutching at their chests, and others were lying completely still. It was defeat. There was no other word for it.

Taking a sharp breath, Cargilla realized that his world was twisting around into itself. He no longer had any idea if he was awake or dreaming.

But as his mind began falling into hallucination, he noticed something unusual. Although he didn't have the ease of mind to closely ponder the incongruity, it nagged at him irresistibly.

'Isn't this hall a little... foggy?'

The moment he thought this, the thin layer of fog over the interior of the house flowed behind him at an alarming rate. The mist cleared in an instant.

Cargilla had no idea what was happening. And from behind him came a voice that could not have been more out of place in such a perilous situation.

"Ahaha! Tee hee hee! Isn't this funny? Isn't this great, hottie? Waaaaait... now that I look at you, you're not that young at all! Should I just call you an old man?"

Cargilla's thoughts were snapped back to reality by the voice. He swung around and found himself face-to-face with a girl in garish clothing. He was certain that there was no one standing there until a moment ago. It was as though she had materialized out of thin air.

The upper half of her face was colored like a certain national flag. She was wearing a red triangle-shaped hat, rather like the one worn by Santa Claus.

Her outlandish costume made her look much like a jester, but she carried herself in a much more sinister fashion than one might expect from an entertainer.

Cargilla awkwardly looked around in an attempt to figure out his situation. But the jester laughed mechanically.

"Ahaha! I bet you're waiting for those hotties who went outside earlier! That's it! They might come rescue you with all their fancy weapons, right? But you know, Mr. Old Man Old Man, don't expect too much, okay? I'm just saying this for your sake. I'm telling you ahead of time so you won't get too sad! So you have to remember I'm doing this for you. Okay? No getting all teary-eyed on me! Ahaha!"

After her drawn-out ribbing, the girl finally got to the point that would push Cargilla into the abyss of despair.

"Tee hee! You know, you know? I already subjugated them!"

"...?"

"Ahaha! I'm talking about those hotties who already went outside. The one with the glasses! They're already under my control! I gave them a lovely little *chomp*! So you know you know? They're not vampires yet, but it's all over for them! Your friend with the glasses, and everyone inside this house! They inhaled me when I was still in fog form. And I dropped in tiny drops of my blood into their lungs! It was so fun. Everyone was gaping like a bunch of fish out of water! Tee hee! I'm scared of daylight, but I can do everything as long as I avoid the sun! Isn't it cool?"

The slow-witted man finally realized the truth. The girl standing before him was a vampire. And if he were to take her word at face value, their fate had already been sealed.

'Shit! This is why we're supposed to kill vampires before we can get a look at their faces!'

Despite his overwhelming powerlessness, Cargilla struggled for his life, drawing a knife from his belt. He had just one target—the girl's heart. This time, the invisible force did not stop him. From the looks of things, the one with that power was not the girl, but the giant that had once been Val.

"Die!"

"Ah-"

The jester froze, taken by surprise at Cargilla's sudden attack.

A small impact shook her body. She looked down and found a large knife sticking out of her chest.

And before she could take a closer look at it, Cargilla twisted the knife as hard as he could.

"Oh..."

The girl looked back at her chest, and then at Cargilla's face. After repeating this gesture several times, her eyes filled with tears.

And she laughed loudly.

"Ahahahahahaha! Tee hee hee hee! Were you scared? Were you?"

Cargilla silently ground his teeth. When he twisted the knife, he had felt no resistance. He had not damaged her heart in the slightest.

"Tee hee hee! You're so cool, Mr. Old Man! I may be a scary vampire, but who has the guts to stab a girl in the chest? And you twisted the knife, too! Maybe that's the one professional thing about you. Or maybe, maybe! Maybe you *enjoy* ripping apart little girls! Mister, don't tell me you got all excited when you saw those girl vampires writhing in their coffins! Ahahaha!"

Something like a fine vapor suddenly covered her chest, and in an instant her body scattered into fog, dissipating into the air. Cargilla angrily fixed his grip on the knife and stepped forward to flee.

The giant at the front door had not made any notable movements since the jester had appeared. Was he yielding to her, or was he just uninterested in Cargilla? His beard-covered face did not allow a hint of emotion to escape.

"Tee hee hee! Hey, you know? Was it hot? That 'Oh...' I said when I got stabbed, I mean! Was it hot? Was it *seductive*?"

As Cargilla rushed further into the house, the girl reassembled herself from the fog behind his back. Cargilla tried to shake her off repeatedly, but each time she scattered and came together again. It was starting to look like she was teleporting around him over and over again.

"Was I cute?"

"Was I stimulating?"

"Was I arousing?"

"Was I sexy?"

"Was I titillating?"

"Was I sensual?"

"Was I erotic?"

"Was I lustful?"

Each time the jester rematerialized, she added an infuriating quip. But at this point, Cargilla was too terrified of the situation and too angry at his own powerlessness to care.

He had slaughtered vampires he thought were stronger than humans.

He was intentionally intoxicating himself on the mistaken assumption that he held great power.

He could annihilate these creatures mercilessly without being constrained by the law.

He was not drunk on the sensation of destruction, but on his own power—the power that brought death upon vampires.

But now he was on the receiving end of that destruction.

An overwhelming power was toying with him in a situation he did not understand, as his life was whittled away little by little. He could hear the sound of everything he had built up to this point crumbling to dust.

Was it power? Confidence? Status? Glory? Everything, even his past and future collapsed into rubble, with the jester laughing atop it.

"Ahaha! You know, I'll tell you something really cool! This is the end, so you're going to hear something amazing. It's like your last feast before your execution! But I'm going to teach you that not all feasts are really delicious. I'm going to be a really nice and gentle teacher!"

With a nauseatingly long lead-in, the jester put her lips by Cargilla's ear.

Cargilla no longer cared to push her away, focusing on running as he jumped over the bodies of his fellow exterminators.

"---- is a ----- too."

Cargilla's eyes turned to dinner plates.

But before he was able to shout, the jester sunk her tiny fangs into his neck.

At the same time, the doorbell that had been ringing all that time stopped, and the door slammed open.

The giant turned around slowly. Standing at the doorway was a young man in a suit. He breathed heavily, glaring at the giant.

"Bastard... If someone's ringing the doorbell, you're supposed to let them in."

"B-but y'said I couldn't let 'nyone in..." The giant blinked, complaining at his superior.

"Ever heard of *adapting to your fucking surroundings*, punk? Or are you one of those mindlessly educated drones the media's talking about these days? Well?!"

The young man slowly raised one leg. The giant's body deflated, changing form into that of a cowering young child.

"I'm sorry! I'm sorry! Please, please don't hit me!"

The child, whose gender was not clear, trembled before the young man, tearing up.

"Whoops, my bad, newbie. I'm not gonna punch you or anything."

The young man smiled gently and landed an axe kick on the child's head.

"Gah!"

"But I can't promise you anything about kicking."

The young man slammed his foot into the child's stomach over and over and over again.

"The fuck is wrong with you? Why the hell do you always transform into a brat when you're apologizing? You think I'm some sort of children's advocate? Or do you think I'm one of those 'punk on the outside, nice big brother on the inside' types? Do you?!"

The young man continued his assault, a thin smile on his lips. Stopping this atrocious act was the voice of a middle-aged man coming from behind him.

"H-hey..."

The young man turned around. A large, trembling man in an army jacket was watching him.

"A-are you human? Wh-where'd that giant go? I don't know who you are, but please! Help me!"

'Huh? What, did they miss one?'

Thinking for a moment, the young man suddenly smiled, straightened out his clothes, stood up straight, and bowed.

"You must be here for the vampire extermination job."

Sweeping aside his barbaric behaviour, he politely introduced himself to the man.

"My name is Watt Stalf. I am the mayor of this city."

Putting on a pair of sunglasses he produced from his pocket, he bowed his head and grinned. A pair of unusually developed canines peeked out from his smile.

"I also moonlight as a vampire."

Silence.

The house, which had been wrapped up in commotion for some time, was now eerily quiet. Only time continued passing at the same pace, as though the three people there were the only beings in the entire world.

The man in the army jacket—Cargilla—observed Watt's fangs for a moment before nodding and suddenly speaking up clearly.

"Actually, me too!"

"...What."

Watt's confident grin faded. The child curled up at the doorway also looked at Cargilla in confusion.

"Hahaha! So you never noticed, Mr. Stalf? You thought I wouldn't figure out your deal? A newcomer to vampire society, working his way up the ranks even though he's half human. And not only that, during the day, you're the up-and coming young mayor of Rukram! A youthful face that couldn't possibly be over thirty, and you're a seedy liar to boot. And those under-the-table deals! You used every ounce of ability you had to gain that political power, you hardworking man—I mean, dhampyr!"

The mysterious man reciting Watt's personal information met his eyes, and suddenly began running at him at full speed.

"I've actually always been in loooooo—!"

"Ack?!"

Sensing a sudden chill, Watt kicked at the man's stomach with all his might.

"Gack..."

Coughing up breath and vomit at once, Cargilla rolled onto the floor, coming to a stop all the way at the other end of the hallway.

Watt, breathing heavily, raised his voice at thin air.

"...Clown. This is *your* doing, isn't it?"

A patch of fog in front of the main entrance responded, quickly materializing into human form.

"Ahaha! You knew? You figured it out, Master Watt? But I bet I scared you, didn't I? Master Watt, I was controlling him just now! Tee hee! I bet you didn't know. Even though my teeth marks are on his neck all red and clear! You have no sense of observation, do you, Master Watt?"

The jester's voice was bright and clear. It would have been something to hear her voice singing, but considering her tone, her words were nothing short of annoying.

Watt grimaced for a moment, then sighed in defeat. He covered his face with his right hand and leaned against the entryway wall with his left.

As he slowly looked aside, the jester continued chattering.

"Tee hee hee hee! You're so slow, Master Watt! Who would ask for help from someone who's kicking a little kid? That should have tipped you off!"

The girl stepped over towards Watt, who remained silent, and suddenly put on a very serious look.

"'I also moonlight as a vampire'."

The jester mocked him, attempting to replicate his voice. Watt said nothing and merely held up a V-sign.

"W-wait, Master Watt! Not the eyes, not the eyes! This is bad for the baby Master Watt eeeeeeeek!"

The jester pranced about with her hands over her eyes. Watt ignored her and turned to unleash his anger on Val. But for some reason, he came face-to-face with himself.

His doppelgänger bowed to him politely.

"I also moonlight as a vampire'."

Watt sent his mirror image, the newbie, flying aside. He put his left foot on the newbie's stomach and his right foot on his face, and dug in his heel.

Again and again.

Once he made sure that Val had stopped moving completely, Watt took out a cell phone from his pocket.

He then picked out a number from his address book and called it.

"It's me."

[Oh, Boss Man!]

He could hear a laid-back voice from over the phone.

"Well? Think you can keep 'em tied up there much longer?"

[Uh, no, sir! Totally impossible. Tonight at the very latest. What is *up* with 'em? Those werewolves are stronger than most vampires, and those green *maids*! You gotta see 'em to believe it, sir, you have no idea how hot they are! Are they seriously just familiars? Uh, to be honest, I don't really wanna die, Boss. Can we go home now? Some of the guys are starting to hit on those maids. At this rate they'll all be there by tomorrow, man—]

Watt hung up and smashed the phone against the ground.

"Fascinating people, those underlings. Don't you think, Clown? Totally different from those fucking stiffs at city council. Irony at its finest."

The jester, who had come back to her senses at some point, suddenly piped up.

"Ahaha! Master Watt, did you remember to back up your data?"

Watt had over two hundred phone numbers stored on his cell phone for his work at City Hall. Said phone was now in pieces on the ground.

The young man in the sunglasses howled in anguish.

"Tee hee! Master Watt, you really are small fry, aren't you? But that's why I love you so much!"

Ignoring the jester, Watt fixed his sunglasses and repeated himself.

"...Never mind. The biggest hurdle is getting through the night."

†

Waldstein Castle, parlor.

[Vampires, you see...]

Shizune was seated on a luxurious sofa. The pool of blood began to lay out small words on the marble coffee table.

The room was elegant, though in a different way from the elegance of luxury hotel rooms. The countless decorations in the room, though expensive, were not garish in the least.

In fact, the home theatre set, the DVD player, and the game consoles beside it lent an incongruous atmosphere to the room. Most of the electronics were Japanese in make, but Shizune was not versed enough in that field to know. And even if she was, that would have changed nothing.

Shizune remained tense, sitting at the very edge of the comfy sofa so that she could spring to her feet at any moment.

Not at all fazed by her attitude, the viscount set out his words before her.

[The vampires you humans see in films and novels are indeed one correct depiction of our kind.]

"One correct depiction?"

[Indeed. An Eater of your caliber must be aware that the capability of each vampire varies greatly. Some can fly through the air with ease and wield monstrous strength; some can never go near water, while others swim through it freely. Some vampires are truly monstrous—one I know of is over five meters long and possesses eight arms. Unfortunately, most such vampires are long extinct. Exterminated by humans.]

"By humans?" Shizune blurted, surprised. The viscount continued matter-of-factly.

[I mean to say that humans like yourself have existed for eons. You must have some idea, seeing as you have been set on your path by tales of other Eaters who have come before you. In other words... only those who had the power to evade capture at human hands have managed to survive this long. Though it may be a humorous situation to behold, it is now the case that we must live in hiding from humans because of our superhuman powers. After all, for all our abilities, we are vastly outnumbered.]

"...Then what in the world are vampires?" Shizune asked quietly, as though urging the viscount to continue.

The vampires she had encountered in the past possessed a truly wide range of abilities. And each time she encountered one, she felt that no two vampires were similar enough that she could see them as being of one species.

And as though having seen through her curiosity, the viscount went straight to the heart of the matter.

[Ah, simply put, vampires also possess life. Our roots lie at the same place as those of you humans.]

The viscount sent another stream of blood to the empty space next to the letters he was writing. On the tabletop he began drawing a diagram that looked very much like a family tree. At first he drew one greater line, from which sprouted many more, from which sprouted yet more lines.

[The coacervates—the first life forms born to a younger Earth—gave rise to countless varieties of organisms. Mutations and coincidences contributing greatly, of course.]

Shizune looked back and forth from the words to the diagram and urged the viscount on in silence.

[What humans generally consider to be living creatures are those organisms that live on this two-dimensional plain I've drawn here—the same dimension as themselves. However]

The viscount's words stopped there, as the diagram went through a rapid shift.

From the middle of one of the branches of blood sprouted yet another branch—but it was growing into the air.

[This was the result of a certain mutation. Think of it as a two-dimensional being reaching out to the third dimension. In other words, that line made contact with a warped dimension.]

"A warped dimension...?"

[It is quite difficult to explain... After all, we have no way of knowing if it truly is a dimension higher than this. But let us deal with this in a vampire-like manner and call this dimension a 'Demonic Realm'. To return to my explanation, a life form that happened to be particularly attuned to this dimension began to evolve in that direction. Of course, these creatures were different from us vampires.]

Multiple streams of blood began rising up into the air from some of the many branches drawn on the marble tabletop. They began to spread randomly, without direction.

[To give you an example, though I've never seen one myself, legendary creatures such as dragons or pegasus may possibly exist. Or perhaps they are so deeply connected to this other dimension that they are not visible to our eyes. Have you ever heard of something called 'flying rods'? They are creatures that are only captured on cameras. They are largely thought to be simple houseflies, but we cannot say for certain that they do not exist. I speak of creatures that exist, but choose not to co-exist with the likes of us.]

After a period of silence, the words he had written on the table collapsed at once as he crafted new sentences onto it.

[But we vampires, you see, are neither here nor there. We inhabit this world and live by the same rules. But depending on the era and the location, we bend and break those rules all too easily. Yet for some reason, the rate at which we mutate is incredibly quick. There are cases of mutations happening over a single generation due to the wills of individuals or the effects of religion, for example. That is why some vampires are weakened by crucifixes. But if I were to name one common factor that links all vampires together, I would have to say... Yes. We vampires can freely exercise control over our souls.]

"Souls...?"

Shizune quietly gasped. Now that she thought about it, that very word was the reason why their battle had been halted and she had agreed to the viscount's invitation to tea.

[Some say that no souls reside within vampires, and in one sense, that is absolutely true. There is no confirmed theory; this is my personal hypothesis and nothing more. A vampire is a creature whose soul is entirely separate from his body, but is able to control his empty shell. In other words, a vampire is a creature who can do what he pleases with his own soul.]

The viscount's explanation did not quite make sense to Shizune. She narrowed her eyes.

Having noticed this, the viscount added another sentence.

[To simplify the matter greatly, I suppose one could say that a vampire's soul uses telekinesis to animate his own corpse.]

"Telekinesis? Seriously? I've seen vampires that could use some sort of invisible force, but..."

[Yes, it is no exaggeration to say that that particular ability is a very basic form of this power. To control one's body freely—no, this is the ability to control the matter that composes one's body, on a molecular or even atomic level. ...Naturally, this control is not perfect. After all, we would otherwise be able to fix our weaknesses, and I would have returned to human form long ago.]

Something about what the viscount said bothered Shizune, but she decided to remain quiet for now and listen to what he had to say.

[For example, take the ability of some vampires to turn into a flock of bats or a patch of fog. The former is an act of dividing oneself into many living creatures, but there is always only one consciousness behind them all. As for the latter, how does one control oneself when he has neither eyes nor brains?]

"Including you."

Shizune meant to make light of the viscount, but the letters of blood did not seem taken aback in the slightest.

[Precisely! I'm certain that you can now understand the mechanics behind the workings of my movement. How could a mass of liquid, lacking muscle of any sort, move this freely? Telekinesis, a power that ignores the laws of physics. My soul is always looking down upon this dimension from another, controlling my body in its myriad shapes. It is the same for vampires who fly through the air. More powerful individuals may be able to turn even the clothes on their back or their jewelry into bats or fog when they transform, but alas! My telekinetic powers only extend to my body, little more. I can do naught but flip the pages of

a book, switch out DVDs, or press buttons on a remote control. If you would give me a little time, I could even perhaps brew some tea. What do you say?]

"No thanks."

The viscount's words collapsed, as though disappointed by Shizune's taciturn response.

But he soon formed yet more words, as though consoling himself. His new utterance caught Shizune's eye.

[Perhaps vampires turn to ash upon death because our bodies were originally formed of mutated substances of similar composition. When an Eater like yourself devours the flesh and blood of a living vampire, perhaps it would be accurate to say that you are gaining the 'soul' energy that had been filling the body. After all, a vampire's blood is the catalyst that circulates the soul's energy through his body. The heart is a weakness for many vampires, but an old friend of mine once theorized—if you were to consider the soul a remote control of sorts, the heart might be a receiver for the signals sent from the soul. In other words, vampires whose hearts are not a weakness are able to use different parts of their bodies as the receiver for the signals.]

"Does that go for you too?" Shizune asked.

The pool of blood did not move.

"You said something about returning to human form earlier, right? What does that mean?"

[It is simple.]

After a moment's hesitation, the viscount decided to disclose his past to the woman who had come to hunt him.

[I once had a human form. No, perhaps it would be more accurate to say that I was once human.]

†

A long time ago, Father was human.

He was bitten by another vampire, whose soul flowed into him through the bite. Father told me that that's how he was turned into a vampire.

He lived that way for a while afterwards, and one day started doing research about the bodies of us vampires. He only had one thing in mind: getting rid of our weaknesses.

Father did everything he could to achieve his goal, and in the end he chose to throw away his own body. He discovered a bacteria that had gone through a strange mutation, just like us, and incorporated it into his own blood. That's how he took on that shape.

He said that that bacteria was like the opposite of vampires. It makes energy when sunlight hits it. It's something like photosynthesis, but it's much more efficient. And now all Father ever needs to live is sunlight.

Thanks to that symbiotic relationship, Father doesn't need to drink blood anymore. There's just one problem, though.

Unlike me and other vampires, Father only has strength under the sun.

Father can't live without daylight.

"My gosh, that's the first time I heard the viscount was human once..."

The sun was setting on Growerth. Relic was on the outskirts of the city, on his way to Hilda's house on the back of a farmer's cart.

Relic was telling Hilda about his father while remaining inside the coffin. Ferret was no longer with him—she had been complaining that she could not board a filthy farming cart, so Relic asked her to go to the castle first so she could announce their arrival.

Michael had followed her as though it was only natural, so it was only Relic and Hilda on the back of the creaky cart.

"I'm sorry for all the trouble." Relic said from inside the coffin.

"Not at all, young sir! Viscount Waldstein's always been so good to us." The old man at the front answered.

Although Growerth was industrialized enough that cars were the main mode of transport, the island also had horse-drawn carriages for tourism purposes. The old man seemed to be using a retired horse to carry his produce to the market in town.

Most people who had lived on this island for a long time knew about the existence of vampires. To be more precise, they were coexisting.

It was not as though humans and vampires had reconciled their differences. It would be difficult for vampires, who had long been thought of as an enemy to humankind, to be accepted so easily into human society.

But things were different on this island.

Growerth, removed from mainland Europe and its long history, had been inhabited by vampires from the very beginning. This was its natural state.

The vampires on this island were always masters over the humans, in one sense.

As industry progressed and Growerth began to maintain frequent contact with the mainland, the vampires left the political stage of the island. But the people of the island accepted vampires like Gerhardt and Relic without so much as a hint of resistance.

However, that did not mean that vampires were given respect or official rights.

Most young people these days assumed that the island had a long and unusual tradition of vampire worship. Very few knew that the Lord of Waldstein Castle still lived, in liquid form.

However, to the harbor officials (who were in charge of keeping track of vampires entering and leaving the island) and the older residents of Growerth, Gerhardt remained their viscount and a respected Lord.

"It's wonderful to have such close friends." The old man said. Relic looked away in embarrassment, despite the fact that he was still inside his coffin.

"Well, Hilda and Michael are the only friends I have around my age."

By the time they arrived at Hilda's house, the sun had set completely. Relic emerged from his coffin. Hoisting it up easily with one arm, he thanked the old man and walked with Hilda to her house.

"Relic, is it all right for you to leave the rest of your things back at the harbor?" Hilda asked tentatively. Relic put on a very human smile.

"Yeah. The maids and Granny Job are coming back tomorrow, so we can carry it all back together."

"You mean that old werewolf lady is coming too?" Hilda asked excitedly. Relic nodded.

"That's amazing! I've only seen her about three times, so I've always wanted to talk to her! Relic, you *have* to introduce us tomorrow!"

'Most humans wouldn't have seen her even once.'

The children in the city had no idea about the secret of Waldstein Castle. Even when their grandparents warned them about the vampire living inside, the young people only ever thought of the castle as a tourist attraction they were not to fool around in. They had nothing against vampires because they did not even believe in their existence.

Hilda and Michael, however, were special.

Of the ignorant children, they alone were exposed to the truth, stepping deeper into the secret of the island than their peers. Having grown up with Relic and Ferret since childhood, they did not see the castle familiars or the bloody viscount as symbols of fear.

"Our parents are way too harsh on you. I can't believe they won't let me even introduce you to anyone. It's not like anyone would believe you're a vampire that easily."

"Ahaha! Maybe I should transform into a flock of bats in front of everyone." Relic joked. Hilda smiled and shook her head.

"You can't do that! Everyone's going to bully you."

Relic was thankful to Hilda for such normal conversation.

Sometimes, when he looked at Hilda, he found himself fighting an irresistible desire.

'I want to make her mine. I want to subjugate her and drink her blood and turn her into a vampire like me.'

Perhaps this desire of his was still weaker than it should be because he was not yet mature.

But he feared that one day, he would lose control of these urges and do something he might regret.

It was not long before leaving on his trip that he had confessed all of this to Hilda. It was, for all intents and purposes, a confession of love to his childhood friend. But he also knew deep down that this could potentially mark the end of their relationship.

When Hilda had finished listening to everything, her eyes were wide.

"What's this all of a sudden, Relic? Michael and I've known all that for a long time. We've been friends with you vampires for years now, haven't we? The viscount told us the same thing before, but I gave him my answer. That I'd make my decision when it came to it. I told him that if you liked me, then I would be ready. Well... actually, I'm really happy that my feelings weren't just a one-sided crush!"

Relic was astonished by her answer. *"You're saying that because you're still young,"* he told her, *"people make mistakes when they're not mature. You're going to change your mind once we've grown up",* he had said.

Although he had come to her to confess his feelings for her, Relic ironically found himself trying to turn her away. But Hilda smiled.

"Then how about this? If I don't change my mind by the time we're adults, then we can get married. You can decide if you want to suck my blood then."

Perhaps that was the exact moment that Relic truly fell in love with Hilda.

That was why he could never bring himself to subjugate her.

Relic had left on his journey partly in order to distance himself from Hilda, so he could get his thoughts in order.

And as for the rest, Ferret had hit the mark.

Even when he spent time with other girls, when it came to drinking their blood, Relic could only think of Hilda's smile.

What he feared was not the act of drinking her blood. It was the idea that he could accidentally subjugate her, or drag her into the world of vampires.

"What's wrong, Relic? I'm sure Mom and Dad will be happy to see you again!"

Hilda smiled innocently as Relic looked back on his past.

"Yeah. Definitely." Relic replied, but he knew deep down that such a thing could never be.

Hilda's parents had come from outside Growerth. Relic could tell easily that they were not too fond of him or Ferret. The couple had been hired by the vampire viscount as tutors to the twins, which allowed Relic and Ferret to meet and befriend Hilda and Michael.

However, Hilda's parents were deathly afraid of vampires. They were not devoutly religious, but their distaste went beyond animosity, turning to terror. For the past ten years they paid

their respects to the viscount like the other islanders, but it was clear that their respect was borne of fear, not admiration.

Relic was already certain that Hilda's parents would greet him with nervous fake smiles and eyes full of terror. The one thing he counted a blessing, however, was the fact that they had never left the island. Perhaps they feared that the vampires would retaliate. Or perhaps one of the familiars, like Granny Job, had threatened them.

As Relic felt his heart grow heavy, he and Hilda arrived at her family's home in the forest.

"Huh?"

They could instantly tell that there was something wrong.

Every last shutter was closed. The front door was smashed into the entryway.

"What... is this...?" Hilda whispered, grasping Relic's arm tightly.

'A burglar?' Relic thought, loosing his senses into the area. He was trying to detect the presence of living creatures, but he could not hear any human breathing or heartbeat.

"...Let's check inside."

Relic raised his arm. Multiple bats emerged from his fingertips and flew into the house.

The images reflected in the eyes of the bats began flashing by in a corner of Relic's mind.

At the same time, Hilda's trembling carried up his arm and all the way to the rest of his body. To her, burglars armed with guns and knives were more terrifying than vampires.

"...Everything but the door seems to be fine."

The interior of the house was not particularly messy, nor could he sense any human presence inside.

But the moment they cautiously began to step forward—

"I've been waiting for you."

The voice had come from inside the house.

It was a practiced tone, the kind that would not have been out of place in the service industry. The voice, entirely foreign to the darkened house, had come from the shadow standing at the end of the hallway leading through the front door.

'But I didn't see anyone there!' Relic thought, and realized something.

The Asian man standing before him had neither breath nor an audible heartbeat.

"...A vampire..."

"Ah, just as one might expect from the honored Relic von Waldstein. I'm glad to note that you are quite observant."

The man smiled mechanically, approaching Relic and Hilda unarmed.

"D-do I know you?"

Despite Relic's hopes, the Asian man was indeed a complete stranger. After all, the man was obviously of East Asian descent, but his perfectly fluent German did not bear a hint of Growerth's characteristic accent.

"Who are you? What happened to the family living here?" Relic asked, shielding Hilda as he cautiously stepped forward.

"Who am I, you ask? I'm terribly sorry. I've run out of business cards since giving up my humanity. ...Ah, yes. Although I didn't intend for it to be this way, my current superior calls me 'Magic Man'."

The Magic Man put on a self-deprecating smile and answered Relic's second question.

"And as for the couple residing in this house, one of our friends bit them both while the young lady beside you was away."

"...!"

Relic bared his still-small fangs slightly at the Magic Man's mechanical response. Hilda nervously looked back and forth from his face to the Magic Man, still not entirely in the loop.

"Hah! I'm sorry, but it's bedtime for the young lady."

The Asian man took out a scarf from his pocket and placed it atop his own head.

"One, two..."

After the sudden countdown, the man's form vanished into thin air.

"Three."

The voice had come from behind Relic.

Before his eyes floated the Magic Man's scarf, and by the time Relic hurriedly turned around, the man's arm was striking down at Hilda's neck.

†

A boy and a girl walked through the forested path leading to the castle.

It was a walking trail that led to the back of Waldstein Castle, on the opposite side of the mountain from the paved road that led to the parking lot.

The land here was almost uncultivated in comparison to the front. The street lamps illuminating the way seemed almost like halfhearted attempts to make the path usable. Humans sometimes traversed this road on walks during the day, but almost no one passed this way after sunset.

"You mustn't pass by this way, because at night this is the path of the vampire viscount..." The elders of the island said, but considering the general lack of belief these days, it was clear that most young people merely considered the elders' warning to be something borne out of concern for their safety rather than the presence of a vampire.

The boy and the girl were traversing that very path. Setting the boy aside, the girl was, strangely enough, wearing a black dress of unusual design.

The girl looked clearly disgruntled. But the boy, who looked to be slightly older than her, was positively beaming.

"I love you!" He said, the moment they were out of anyone's earshot. Ferret almost tripped.

"Ferret! Are you okay?"

"I am beginning to wonder if your *head* is all right!" Ferret shot at Michael, who looked at her worriedly. But he smiled gently and blushed as though nothing was wrong.

"Aw, thanks for worrying about me, Ferret."

"That is not what I meant!"

Ferret shook her head, astonished. She walked on without sparing a glance at Michael.

"Unbelievable... Have you no shame?"

"I thought that was completely natural, though... anyway, what's your answer?"

"I refuse to respond to cheap confessions of love that I receive at every occasion!" Ferret spat angrily, but she did not try to end the conversation.

If she wanted to, she could climb up the mountain so quickly that Michael could never catch up. But whether she was aware of it or not, she matched her pace to his as they traversed the path together.

"Even cheap confessions are worth a lot if you pile them all up."

"That is most unfortunate, then, as I throw them out each time I receive one." Ferret said coldly, being unnecessarily stubborn.

"Ahaha! Don't worry, Ferret. I'm not going to give up that easily."

Ferret was lonely.

Living with the fact that she was a vampire, she grew to feel an ever-growing sense of loneliness.

Her brother, while possessed of countless weaknesses, was the quintessential vampire. In comparison, she had neither weaknesses nor the special powers her brother could wield.

Although they were both adopted, their great resemblance to each other made it certain that the two of them were twins. That was why Ferret did not have confidence in herself, so different from her older brother.

Though she was a vampire, she was very much unlike one.

'Why in the world was I born?'

Ferret's line of thinking went in a much more negative direction than Relic's.

Because she was unaffected by sunlight, she could choose to attend a normal school if she wished. But she personally refused to do so. More than the fear of being rejected by her peers was her fear of being separated from her brother. She was scared that, should she choose to walk a separate path from Relic, she would eventually become someone completely different from him.

Why were they born? As they grew to realize that they were not normal vampires, Ferret began to find herself sinking into uncertainty.

But one day, her adoptive father spoke to her.

[If you are feeling uncertain about yourself, my daughter, then you must have resolve. It can be anything you choose—the resolve to protect a loved one, or even to rule the world, if you wish. And as long as you remain true to your resolution, your self-perceived reason for existence will follow naturally.]

'Then... I'll choose to protect my brother. Because we're on the same boat.'

'I don't mind things this way. I'll live on for eternity alongside him. We're each other's only blood relations. Because he has everything that I don't, I'll be his shadow. Because that will mean I was born to help Relic for all of time. That's why I'll do anything to protect him—even if it means annihilating all humans and vampires from the world.'

It was just around the time when Ferret was quietly cementing her resolve and closing her heart that a certain young man walked into her life.

Initially, the boy named Michael was nothing more than a childhood friend. Ferret had never gone out of her way to talk to him, and considered him nothing more than the son of her tutors. However—

"I love you." He had said to her out of the blue. Ferret did not instantly understand what he meant. It was only after taking a few moments to process this information that she responded:

"I'm not interested."

It was nothing short of a flat-out rejection. Ferret honestly had no interest in Michael. In fact, she was more concerned about the girl named Hilda, in whom Relic was greatly interested.

But fortunately (or unfortunately) for Ferret, Michael was not the type to back off so easily.

"I'm going to love you more than you care about Relic!"

"...!"

Honestly shocked by Michael's declaration, Ferret finally looked him in the eye. She had always thought that she had been able to conceal her thoughts. She thought that the change in her attitude towards her brother did not show in her behaviour. But the young man before her seemed to know her so well that he had noticed those subtle changes.

But she coldly thought to herself:

'I see. He must not know that I'm a vampire. Otherwise he'd never say anything like that to me.'

With that line of reasoning, Ferret allowed her true identity to show in broad daylight, despite her father's strict warnings. She glared at Michael and showed off her fangs.

She demonstrated her superhuman strength by throwing him with one arm.

However—

Very fortunately(or very unfortunately) for Ferret, Michael was the type of person who responded to all challenges with great enthusiasm.

"I don't care if you're a vampire. In fact, I love you as you are, as a vampire!"

As Ferret listened to the confession of the boy whose head was bleeding, she found herself truly cornered.

She was terrified. It was not that she disliked Michael. In fact, her disinterest had given way to a tiny hint of curiosity. But she was scared of accepting someone else into her world—forging a connection to a part of the outside world.

It felt as though, the moment she made that connection real and became part of the world, her existence itself would be denied.

The mentally cornered thirteen-year-old girl desperately racked her brains for a reason to reject the young man before her, and arrived at a certain conclusion.

"D-do you honestly believe that an aristocrat like myself could possibly deign to be with a commoner?!"

That was when she began to obsess over aristocracy and the Waldstein name.

"Why do you always have to talk so politely?" Her brother Relic would complain for the next three years.

But standing before Ferret now was a young man who didn't have a care for the class difference that supposedly stood between them.

"I asked the viscount when you left. I mean, I asked him if I could start dating you."

"What?!"

Ferret stopped in her tracks and shot Michael a glare.

"A-and how did Father respond...?"

"He said he couldn't give his daughter to someone who tried to suck up to her family first. He just leapt up on me! I thought I was going to drown."

Michael's response somehow put Ferret at ease, but also left her confused. Shrugging it off, however, Ferret quietly replied.

"I see... That is most unfortunate."

"But I'm not gonna give up. Oh, right! You know, I'm gonna be an actor. I'm gonna be an awesome performer like Sean Connery and get knighted by the Queen. What do you think? I'll be a human knight protecting a vampire princess. Doesn't it sound like something out of a fairytale? And then they fall in love."

Ferret had many things to say about Michael's dreams, but she decided to point out one thing in particular.

"...Peerage no longer exists in Germany."

In some ways, it was a denial of her own family. But Ferret continued undeterred.

"Father is now the only aristocrat left in this country..."

Ferret knew full well that, no matter what she said about her family, the noble title was something her father worked for personally. She could not boast about the title, when she was not even his blood relation. All Ferret had to her name was her vampiric blood—something she had personally designated to be superior to humans out of pride.

As she began to withdraw into her shell, Ferret caught a glimpse of someone descending the mountain slope. She looked up, wondering who it could be.

"Ferret! Are you all right?!"

It was her brother Relic, his clothes for some reason ragged.

"Honored Brother?!"

"Relic! Hey, are you okay? Where's Hilda?"

Ferret and Michael hurried over to him. Relic punched at the ground angrily.

"Damn it! Some Japanese vampire ambushed us at Hilda's place... And he kidnapped her!"

"What...?!"

Michael anxiously grabbed Relic by the collar.

"Hold it! I thought you were with her!"

"I'm sorry... He was just too strong. I couldn't possibly—"

But before he could finish his sentence, Ferret's fist drove itself into Relic's face.

Ferret's show of unrestrained power sent Relic flying through the air, crashing into a tree on the mountainside with unthinkable force. This was strength dozens of times more powerful than the likes of which she used against Michael.

Relic slid down the tree trunk without so much as a squeak.

"I also have a question for you." Ferret said coldly, wearing a mask of ice and cloaking herself in bloodlust.

"Who are you?"

Silence.

The mountain path was lit by nothing but the street lamps. As they stood in darkness so deep that they would be swallowed if they took a single step off the path, a strange silence came over them.

"Ugh... That was pretty brutal..." The person taking Relic's form mumbled, groaning in pain. By the time he stood up, he no longer looked like the young vampire.

He was dressed like a tourist, but Ferret and Michael had no way of knowing that this was Val, taking the form of the newbie vampire exterminator.

"I mean, even if you figured out I wasn't your brother, how could you hit someone with his face that hard? Or was it something like 'my brother would never leave a girl in distress'? Something corny like that? Is that how you caught me?"

Although his form had changed, it seemed he was still reeling from pain. Val looked at Ferret with his eyes not yet focused.

"Not at all. I am afraid your failure was evident long before that."

"Yeah?"

As the transforming vampire stood before her eyes, Ferret uttered something she knew as unmistakeable fact:

"Honored Brother is much too powerful to possibly lose to anyone!"

†

Hilda's house.

It was approximately a month ago that his plans began to go awry.

Before that, things had been sailing very smoothly.

About ten years ago, he was merely a salesman who dabbled in stage magic. But that was when he was bitten by a vampire and turned, starting a new life.

He was not like the street performers who used all kinds of tricks and devices to perform magic. He had been promoted to a Magic Man, in every sense of the word.

The vampire who had turned him perished in a forest fire about five years ago. But having already drank the blood of many humans, the Magic Man could not return to the world of humanity. He was left abandoned in the world, a vampire without a master.

It was exhilarating, the sense of freedom. He was so overjoyed by his liberation that he drank the blood of ten humans that night.

Avoiding settling down in one place for too long, he had traveled all across Japan. And before he knew it, he was mingling with other vampires.

Their little organization slowly grew larger and larger. And as soon as he found himself a possible position in a large organization in Europe, he cut off all the ties he had created thus far and entered that organization. Having been acknowledged for his skills as a negotiator, he worked as a subordinate of Watt Stalf and cemented his position in the organization.

His superior was powerless and incompetent. Watt was nothing more than a stepping stone for him. Not only did Watt refuse to acknowledge his subordinates, on a more personal level, he would never stop calling him 'Magic Man'. It drove him mad to hear that nickname all the time.

But his plans had only truly started to go wrong approximately one month ago.

They had caught and trapped a vampire who was supposedly a viscount of some sort. They froze him with liquid nitrogen and sealed him in his coffin. After making light of his incompetent superior, the Magic Man had been planning to follow orders from above and capture the two vampires in Yokohama. But by the time he and the others arrived in Japan, both targets had already left.

They had gone to the trouble of sealing away the troublesome viscount and seeking out the duo hiding overseas, but it had all amounted to nothing.

That was when they were contacted by Watt, who also worked at the city council. A British couple had received a letter from Relic, and came to Watt and disclosed its contents. They had asked him how they could protect their children from the vampires.

On the letter, Relic wrote that he and Ferret would arrive a day ahead of their familiars to meet Hilda and Michael.

It was a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity, the Magic Man thought. If he could use this situation to his advantage, he could attain more influence than Watt.

But only a week afterwards, the vampire that commanded both him and Watt died.

He was told that he had been murdered.

'Impossible.'

At first he could not believe the report.

Not only was the murdered superior powerful, he was not the kind of fool who would allow humans to discover his resting place.

Not only that, he had been murdered during the night.

Could such a human being exist? Someone who could face off against such a powerful vampire at midnight?

The death of their superior brought their plans screeching to a halt.

It was not long before Watt gleefully took matters into his own hands.

Several days ago, Watt ordered them to continue with the plan, claiming that he intended to honor their superior's will.

"Mr. Stalf, I cannot agree with this. I don't mean that I do not want to carry out the plan, but since our superior has passed, I feel that we should wait for orders from the other officers before acting!" He had said, his tone sharper than it usually was. Watt's reply came with a look of annoyance.

"Yeah? Who gives a shit? The bigwigs up there don't give a rat's ass about us. Besides, Mel's the only one who wanted to go through with this anyway. The Organization's not some corporation. It's a social club. If you really want someone to boss you around, I'll take the job."

"...Even if it means your actions will cut us off from them?"

"I'll cross that bridge when I come to it. They're all just a bunch of shitheads anyway."

'This man isn't going to listen to reason.'

Nothing good would come of being involved with Watt Stalf any further, the Magic Man thought, and decided to eliminate him.

He was certain that it would be a simple task to kill a single powerless dhampyr. Not only that, their superior had originally assigned him this role to keep an eye out on Watt's actions. If the Magic Man wanted to make a good impression on the other officers of the Organization, he would have to follow through with his role. And the time was ripe.

The moment he made his decision, he stepped behind Watt's back in the blink of an eye.

Watt's heel smashed into his face.

"?!"

Watt was sneering, having moved at speeds the Magic Man could never have imagined possible.

'How could this be...?'

Until just a month ago, Watt's power did not even qualify him to be called a vampire. He was only above the Magic Man in status because of his position in the public world as a mayor. How could he have come this far so quickly?

'No. This is impossible. This is impossible...'

Uttering the kind of words that a magician like him should have heard from his audience, the Magic Man collapsed. When he opened his eyes, he had become Watt's loyal underling.

He had changed his colors as though in an act of magic, while quietly waiting for the day he could reach upwards once more.

But his plans went awry yet again.

He intended to knock out Relic's childhood friend to take her hostage and negotiate with him. However—

"Are you okay, Hilda?"

"...Yeah, I'm fine."

The Magic Man had struck, but Relic and Hilda were conversing as though nothing had happened.

A flock of bats had sprouted from Relic's shoulder, catching the Magic Man's arm as it fell like a katana. The bats squeezed against one another as though creating a symmetrical image, wrapping themselves around the Magic Man's arm with the kind of strength normal bats would never be capable of.

"...You could have hurt Hilda." Relic said coldly.

"...Urgh!"

The Magic Man flinched and found himself trying to step backwards, overwhelmed by Relic's decidedly un-childlike glare.

'Wait. Wait. This isn't what was supposed to happen.'

The Magic Man thought he knew what he was getting himself into when he came to challenge Relic von Waldstein, having full knowledge of what kind of creature he was. But the Magic Man underestimated Relic, thinking that the boy was still bound by his immaturity. Though he had heard about Relic's various abilities, he was also told that Relic was not very proficient at them yet. The Magic Man had initially agreed with this assessment.

But the reflexes and the power Relic was showing before his eyes made it clear to the Magic Man that Relic was stronger than him.

Gritting his teeth, he glared at the boy. But he soon broke out into a grin.

"...Astounding. Flawed though as you are, a perfected product is really on a different level altogether."

"...?"

Having no idea what the Magic Man was talking about, Relic found himself looking into the man's eyes.

The Magic Man did not let this chance escape him. He began to unsettle Relic, laying the foundation for his trickery.

"Hm? It looks like you had no idea. You don't know how you came to be, or how you twins came to have such unusual characteristics, do you?"

It was an all-or-nothing attack.

A clear look of doubt came over Relic's face as his attention went from Hilda to the Magic Man. The Magic Man continued to cast his spell, drawing Relic's attention ever closer into his domain.

"So in the end, Viscount Waldstein never told a thing to his children. How stubborn of him. After all, you'd have found out sooner or later. Or maybe he was trying to use the two of you for his own ends as well!"

"What... are you trying to say? ...Right. Who are you?"

"Ah, excuse me. To put it simply, I was sent here to bring you with us."

The Magic Man was putting on layer after layer of dramatic politeness, but this was all a part of his plan.

Confirming that Relic's attention was now solely focused on him, the Magic Man began to explain the truth about the existence of the boy.

"Relic... before you were adopted into the Waldstein family, you had no last name. After all, you were born for the sole purpose of becoming a living relic, in the exact sense of the word."

†

Waldstein Castle, Parlor

[And that was when I threw myself into the lava, using my vaporous form to blind my enemy!]

"Interesting."

How much time had passed? Shizune was not displeased about listening to the viscount's past exploits, but the vampire had begun to weave the tales of his metamorphosis, the agonies of his early days in his liquid form, the incident in which he faced down bandits as a pool of blood, the commotion that took place when a Christian chapel was built under the castle, and other stories from his life, into an epic adventure.

It was already dark outside, and the parlor was lit by a fluorescent chandelier, quite different from the one in the bedroom. About half of the castle had been cordoned off from visitors, and the interior of the rooms in that section were little different from those one might find at large mansions.

The marble table was covered in words and illustrations. It almost looked like a television that only displayed the color red. Viscount Waldstein seemed to be quite accustomed to that sort of presentation. He paused writing at climactic moments, and employed other such tactics to draw in his lone audience member into his tales.

[Gitarin, who hails from the same Organization as yours truly, praised my actions]

Shizune had been listening attentively until this point, but she suddenly interrupted him.

"You keep mentioning an 'Organization'. What is it?"

[Ah, have I neglected to explain? Simply put, it is a gathering of vampires that is used mainly for the exchange of information.]

Shizune turned her attention from the viscount's story on the marble canvas to the viscount himself.

"...Tell me more."

The viscount only seemed to have remembered who Shizune was after looking her in the eye. Hurriedly shaking his liquid form, he formed yet more words on the table.

[Wait a moment, I ask you. I understand why an Eater such as yourself might seek out a gathering of vampires. But I've no intention of selling out my former associates, nor do I have any idea of what has happened to them in the hundreds of years since I departed their company.]

"...Seriously? Look. I listened to what you had to say, and I like you. I know I'll kill you eventually, since you're a vampire and all, but I'll probably save you for last and I don't mind being friendly with you until then. And if I die of old age before that, then you get to live. So I think you'd be better off telling me where I can find more of these vampires."

Shizune's declaration was decidedly different from the well-known vows of 'I am the only one who can defeat you'. Her simple statement of 'I like you, but I'll kill you eventually' reached the viscount's senses, icy smile and all.

There was no colour to her emotion, save for the obvious signs of curiosity. Although the viscount felt a sense of danger in that expression, he did not allow this to hinder his attempts at a conversation.

And as though asking for payment in return for disclosing his past, he cautiously threw out a more personal question to the Eater.

[...What lies at the base of your obsession with vampires, may I ask?]

It was a question directed at her very core. Shizune paused, then looked at the pool of blood by the table with determination, and confessed the truth.

"It used to be revenge. It still is. But now, my revenge... it's almost like... there's no joy in life."

With that, Shizune revealed her story. She had no intention of disclosing any of it to the other exterminators, let alone any other humans—to do such a thing would be meaningless.

It could only have meaning when she told it to the vampire before her—her enemy.

The story of how a vampire suddenly appeared at her peaceful village.

How her family was murdered.

How she swore to get revenge on all vampires.

How she killed a vampire for the first time.

How things began to change in her heart—

Little by little she began to unveil her past.

[A most wretched circumstance indeed... Though we vampires cannot survive without blood, one who cannot bind fetters upon himself can do little more than drive those around him to ruin. I have neither the right to apologize on that vampire's behalf, nor the right to pass judgement on that creature, but allow me to at least wish your family a peaceful rest.]

Having heard Shizune's story to the end, the viscount slowly wrote out those words on the table. Shizune waited for him to continue, but he did not show any sign of doing so.

"...You're not going to say anything about me? You're not going to say something like how revenge won't satisfy my family? I was sure you'd be the type to lecture me like that."

[Hm? Vengeance is something one undertakes in order to arrive at inner peace. It is not done particularly for the sake of the dead.]

Shizune narrowed her eyes, surprised at the viscount's answer, and smiled bitterly.

"...I see."

[Of course, that does not mean I agree with your course of action entirely. ...Allow me to ask. If your brother's murderer had been, not a vampire, but a human, would you have set out to annihilate all of humanity?]

"Humans don't drink blood."

[By that logic, there are many vampires who do not kill humans.]

Although she almost felt like like she was being coaxed into answering, Shizune did not falter.

"I guess I still would. Yeah. I would. I'd kill them all—annihilate humanity with my own two hands."

She was half driven by stubborn pride at this point. Shizune looked away as she answered.

The viscount took that to mean that she was lying, and judged that he was able to move her heart, if ever so slightly.

[Do you think that the act of ceasing to think is the same as seeing one's resolve through to the end? To come to a resolution and accomplish one's conviction is also a path of its own, to be certain. But I fear I cannot condone the act of regarding stopping one's thought processes and living by one's resolve as one and the same.]

Silence. Shizune wondered for a moment where she should lay her eyes, then took a deep breath and changed the subject.

"What is the Organization's purpose? World domination?"

[It is no secret society, by any means. Nothing so pompous. As I said earlier, its members merely exchange information at most. It was founded by about twenty vampires, including myself. Another vampire and I were researching the evolution of vampires. I have told you about the circumstances regarding my body, but there was one other who was approaching the same idea, but from a different direction.]

As the atmosphere calmed once more, the letters of blood formed words in a rather old-fashioned font as though reminiscing about the past.

[To put simply, it was a plan to create thoroughbreds. A rather mythical idea—to have powerful vampires breed and thicken their vampiric blood. Ah, I suppose Count Dracula might be a suitable example to use. Many films present him as the ancestor or origin of all vampires, but the extent of his powers wax and wane with the ages. Much like gods and devils. But you see, such a powerful and omnipotent being has never existed in the history of vampires. The characteristics of many different vampires coalesced in the minds of the collective and gave birth to that fictional character. Of course, I cannot deny the possibility that I have, in my ignorance, overlooked such a creature who truly existed. But in any event, this friend of mine from the Organization had set out to create such a powerful vampire.]

One stream of blood rose up and began twisting, as though drawing a shape in midair.

"Breeding vampires? ...Is that even possible?"

[A rather difficult thing, I fear. It turned out that vampires with few weaknesses have less in the way of abilities, as well as reproductive capability. Even more so for those with many abilities and few weaknesses. After all, if they cannot die, they have no need to leave behind progeny. But they wished to create such powerful beings. To put simply, the easier a creature is to kill, the more offspring they will wish to leave behind. The process of evolution was necessary for a vampire to reach this ultimate state. It would be nothing unusual for such a process to take place because of the imposition of one's will, especially considering our nature as vampires. Or rather, that is more or less what ended up occurring.]

The letters of blood collapsed, then reformed themselves.

[Let me begin with the conclusion. As the result of their efforts, they produced a vampire that might only appear in myths—one with power enough to be known as a god or a devil. But in exchange, this vampire was also left with almost every weakness known to us. Sunlight(like most vampires), garlic, salt, holy water, silver, an intense repulsion to holy

artifacts, et cetera. The weaknesses of each vampire had been all compiled into this one individual!]

It was easy to tell that the viscount's words contained a great deal of emotion. Was Shizune imagining it? There seemed to be something slightly disheveled about the layout of the words.

[Many years ago—decades, perhaps—I happened to provide a place of hiding for a pair of vampires who had escaped to this island. They were guinea pigs of the Organization, and already extremely close to their intended perfect product. I listened to their story and accepted them as my guests. However, those two vampires lost their lives to a human Hunter. I cannot tell you how much I loathed myself for being unable to even watch over their final moments. And as penance, I took in their offspring as my own. To give their children happiness and freedom, as my friends would have wished. And if possible, for them to take my position over this island one day. With the most impeccable etiquette and courtesy, of course.]

"...What's this about etiquette and—"

[Ah, I believe it is imperative that one possess at least a modicum of courtesy, especially as a vampire, in order to one day interact with the people of the mainland. Proper manners will always triumph over small misunderstandings! If, one day, vampire and human could partake in the drinking of blood hand-in-hand with courtesy, I should like to be present to witness such an ideal sight.]

The letters of blood passionately described images of a likely impossible dream. But Shizune, ever the picture of calm, tossed out a question.

"What happened to the vampire who conducted those experiments?"

[What happened to Melhilm, you ask? Ah, he seems to be targeting my children, but I can rest easy knowing that my familiars are watching over them. ...Hm?]

The viscount trailed off suddenly, as though having just remembered something.

[Now that I think on it... why in the world was I sealed within my own coffin? It was so sudden that I cannot recall... Although I do believe I heard Watt's voice at the very end.]

The viscount recounted his memories, bringing them to light one by one. But Shizune spoke up as though to stop him.

"Melhilm Herzog..."

[Ah! So you know of him!]

"I know him very well. I just happened to eat him recently... He was delicious."

Her expression was cold as ice, unmoving and utterly static. But in her eyes there was an unmistakable glint of excitement, greater than any she had shown before.

"...So, where can I find your son and daughter?"

Hilda's house.

"...It can't be..."

Upon hearing the secrets behind his birth from the Magic Man, Relic grasped for words in shock.

"No. That's not possible... How could... Ferret and me... No..."

"It is no lie, I promise you. You were born to be the relic of a nonexistent ancestor—a contradictory existence. You are the product of centuries' worth of experiments, born to generations of research subjects."

A relic(t) was a term used for an organism whose features remained unchanged since ancient times, such the coelacanth. In the pursuit of the nonexistent being known as the ancestor of all vampires, a series of experiments were conducted to give birth to such a creature.

When Relic thought about it, the Magic Man's explanation was not all that unexpected. He had wondered for a long time about his obviously unusual set of powers, and sometimes even pondered the possibility that he was born as the result of an experiment. But until his suspicions were confirmed, he had always tried to brush them off as products of his overactive imagination.

Perhaps he could have held on to the hope that the Magic Man had lied, but if that were the case, there would be no reason for such a strange vampire to have appeared before him at a time like this.

As all kinds of thoughts surfaced in his mind, the Magic Man continued as though trying to push him further into a corner.

"However, you were created with a flaw."

"...?!"

"Those many weaknesses you posses were originally intended for your twin sister. Of course, the fact that you are twins was something that had been artificially induced from the start. Your sister would have been made to take on every weakness while you were both still in the womb... Of course, not even modern medical science could induce such a thing. It would be a mistake to assume that we vampires and our still-inadequate technology could possibly succeed in such a feat. Astonishingly enough, you became host to all abilities and weaknesses at once. Perhaps as a side-effect, your sister ended up as a nearly featureless vampire..."

Relic started feeling even sicker when the Magic Man mentioned Ferret. It was even worse than taking a whiff of garlic.

"In other words, your sister existed as a scapegoat."

Waldstein Castle, parlor.

The Eater's sudden question about the whereabouts of his children suddenly snapped the viscount back to his senses. The pool of blood itself shook violently, as though the question had come as a great shock to him.

[They have left on a journey to become human, to the shoulder of the constellation Orion. I've sent them off on a vampire rocket powered by vampire engines—more specifically, the V(ampire) Mark II.]

"...You're a terrible liar, huh?" Shizune said incredulously. The viscount's body squirmed.

[It is only courteous to avoid using any derivative of the word 'lie' when a gentleman feels he must obfuscate the truth. What I claimed to you was no falsehood, but a dream! True gentlemen bring encouragement to others through tales of dreams.]

"Like some bragging baron from a fairytale..."

[Ah! Baron Münchhausen, you say! But I ask that you correct yourself. It is no mere fairytale! It is a great tale of adventure: 'Marvelous Travels on Water and Land: Campaigns and Comical Adventures of the Baron of Münchhausen, published by Gottfried August Bürger'. The film 'The Adventures of Baron Münchhausen' was an absolute delight to behold.]

The viscount rambled on on the marble tabletop. Shizune looked quite surprised.

"So you even watch movies?" She asked, and remembered the DVD player sitting in the corner of the room.

[Ah, impudently enough, I, Gerhardt, am captive audience not only to films, but all kinds of stories.]

"I bet you're the type to think everything you watch is amazing."

[Nothing that exists in this world is not amazing! It is all merely a matter of personal preference!] The viscount said with unnecessary excitement. But Shizune, having figured out his intentions, quietly repeated her earlier question.

"So, where are your children?"

Silence came over them once more.

It was a particularly long period of calm. The pool of blood—the viscount—eventually swirled about and boldly scrawled his answer on the table, as though trickery would matter little at that point.

[I shall be frank with you. I stated earlier that I have no obligation to fight you, but should you choose to attack my children, I will have no choice but to protect them. In times of war is it not unusual for even sixteen-year-olds to bear arms, but as long as such dark shadows are never cast on this island I am obligated to defend my family. ...But I could not possibly bring myself to fight against a lovely young woman who has so patiently listened to my tales. I shall refuse! And this is why I ask you to desist, for my sake!]

"I don't want to fight someone who's been such good company, either. But I feel like... if I'm going to kill you eventually, I might as well do it now. But I'll just say this: Thanks. I had fun today."

Having felt something other than a sense of curiosity for the first time, Shizune smiled lightly—not as an Eater, but as a human.

"But I still want to meet your children."

Shizune withdrew her smile and made to get off her seat. However—

"...?"

[What might be the matter?]

"There's something about this room... It's faint, but I can sense another vampire here."

[Ah, so Eaters are capable of sensing our presence? Such a thing is impossible for we fellow vampires, but ah, this is most fascinating.]

With the viscount's exclamation, all movement in the room ceased. Suddenly, the voice of a young girl rang out from midair.

"Ahahaha! You noticed, you noticed! Tee hee! That was so quick! And so cool!"

Several seconds later, Waldstein Castle was enveloped by a thin layer of fog.

[Ah, a vampire burglar, are you? Rather elegant, snapping up treasure while taking vaporous form, but might I suggest that you send in a warning next time, as all proper thieves do?]

The fog suddenly grew dense in front of the surprisingly laid-back letters formed by the viscount. It then solidified into the form of a girl.

"Tee hee! Hello there, Viscount Waldstein! I guess this is the second time we meet! Although last time, there was a coffin lid blocking our way. It's pretty obvious, but I'm a jester! You can call me anything! A Pierrot, a Clown, an Auguste, whichever one you like."

[Ah... So are you one of the ones who sealed me into my coffin? I wish to officially file a complaint. Would you perhaps direct me to your leader?]

Hearing the girl's voice, the viscount turned his attention to the parlor window, where she had materialized, and put up letters in English to match her language.

[Ah, and concerning the matter of how I may address you... Might I presume that you are fully aware of the implications of each name?]

"Huh?"

[Are you aware that a 'Pierrot' is a term used exclusively for those characters in Commedia dell'Arte? The theory that the term 'clown' is derived from a word meaning 'serf'? Or the role of an Auguste?]

The English phrases formed themselves in the air before the jester, bombarding her with one question after another.

"Eee—eek! I'm sorry I'm sorry I'm sorry I'm sorry I didn't know I'm really sorry I won't do it again!"

The jester looked as though she would burst into tears at any moment. The letters collapsed once more and formed themselves into softer words.

[Slow down, young lady. Ignorance is no sin. So long as you live on with a passion for learning]

At that very moment, Shizune's arm quickly and extravagantly sliced down from behind the viscount.

A silvery object cut straight through the letters of blood and pierced the jester's heart.

"Sorry, I'm no good at English." Shizune said emotionlessly, throwing one fork after another.

The jester girl looked surprised for a moment, but her shock quickly gave way to a grin.

"Tee hee hee! That's not good! That's not going to work at all!"

Forks pierced her body over and over again, but they passed right through her without leaving so much as a scratch.

"Ahaha! What am I doing, I shouldn't be relaxing! I'm here to kill you!"

The moment the jester declared her intention and turned into fog, the viscount interpreted for Shizune.

[She says that she is here to kill you.]

"...Thanks for your help."

The viscount then wrote out his thoughts in both Japanese and English, and displayed them to Shizune and the jester.

[I fear it will not do for the two of you to run rampant here. There is a ballroom down the main stairs. Might I suggest that you relocate?]

†

What's going on?

This is the viscount.

This weird red pool of blood is the viscount.

Master Watt tricked him into getting into the coffin and sealed it, and today that stupid extermination team let him out.

He's so weird. Not just his looks. His personality too.

It's not really something I should be saying, but... He's in such a scary situation. Why does he look so relaxed?

But I don't care anymore. I'm going to kill this girl for Master Watt's sake. I'll kill her. I'm not going to subjugate her. I'll never let her evolve into a vampire. I'm just going to kill her. For Master Watt.

Master Watt's probably going to get angry at me for it. But I can't help it.

Master Watt rescued me when I was dying in an alley in New York. All I can do as a vampire is turn to fog, but Master Watt rescued me.

I was about to be killed by other vampires, but Master Watt used cheap tricks to save me.

He brought up Mr. Melhilm's name and bluffed his way through.

He's the one who helped me, but I thought then, 'what a petty villain'. But as I sat there shaking, Master Watt laughed and said I looked like a clown.

Master Watt is a petty villain and a piece of garbage, but that smile he showed me was so wonderful.

I just want to see that face again.

But if I don't kill this girl now, I'm not going to be able to see his smile ever again.

†

Having nimbly escaped the parlor, Shizune descended the stairs and leapt into the ballroom. She was not particularly interested in humoring the viscount's request—it was just that she would have an easier time fighting the fog specialist in a wide-open area.

Although she could potentially kill her target by driving her into a closed-off space, Shizune preferred to lure her opponent into an attack-focused strategy, striking back the moment the vampire rematerialized. that was why she had elected to use a location where she could fight her opponent from a slight distance.

However, the ballroom was already filled with guests.

The exterminators, armed with their garishly ostentatious equipment.

And a man and a woman who were strangers to Shizune, likely residents of Growerth.

"What's this? What happened to the slime?" Cargilla said, approaching Shizune with a gentle smile and a gun in hand.

It was a smile he would never have shown her back when they were on the ferry. But his eerily bright grin soon clued in Shizune to the situation.

"You've been turned... No, you're still at the subjugation stage." Shizune said gravely, drawing a fork.

"You catch on pretty quick." Cargilla said, and pulled the trigger without hesitation.

But at that very moment, a fork was driven into his middle finger. The bullet was fired, but it went flying over Shizune's head.

At the sound of the gunshot, Shizune leapt forward. Her superhuman strength propelled her all the way up to the chandelier.

The humans had been robbed of their consciousness, now acting as little more than puppets dancing to their master's will. The quickest way to end this situation would be to defeat the master. However—

"Damn it... the clown's not here!"

No matter how much she looked around, Shizune could not sense the jester anywhere.

As she ground her teeth, a stake filled with explosives was launched towards her from below.

The jester was standing at a balcony very far from the ballroom, listening to the sound of explosions.

"Tee hee hee! I wonder if she could kill them. They're still innocent humans that aren't completely turned yet, after all! Could she kill them? Or not? Ahahaha!"

All the jester had to do was allow the subjugated humans to exhaust Shizune. Then she would flow into the Eater's lungs while in fog form, and materialize from the inside. That would end things permanently.

Although she would only have to materialize part of herself, she was up against an Eater—a being who could sense the presence of vampires. She could not approach recklessly, or she would be attacked in turn.

The jester turned back to the balcony entrance, toying with the idea of going to the ballroom.

[Ah, a difficult predicament.]

There was a pool of blood on the balcony floor.

[I'm afraid that I must ask you to release those humans you have subjugated. That couple is a guest to this land and myself, working as tutors to my children. And as for those good Saints, they are the ones who released me from my sealed coffin.]

The jester read the viscount's words carefully. Her eyes widened for a moment, and she grinned impishly.

"Ahahaha! Viscount, you're way too nice! Do you even know what's going on? Those silly exterminators came to this island to exterminate *you*! And, and, and? The ones who asked Master Watt to get rid of you? It's that couple right over there! Sure, they're working as

tutors, but they've always been scared of you and your kids! Tee hee! Didn't you know? Are you surprised? Is it a shock?"

As the jester guffawed before him, the viscount quickly formed his next sentence.

[I've already known about the latter for some time now.]

"Ahahaha... Huh?"

[Ah, if they had only voiced their desire to resign, I would not have stopped them. But to think I'd driven them to such a dilemma... It is my fault entirely. But seeing my children grow so close with theirs, I could not bring myself to take charge in resolving the matter in such a way. And in any event, I should have expected that Watt was involved in this incident... It has been a good decade now since he first began harassing me.] The viscount said, as though mumbling to himself.

Then, he turned back to the jester and addressed her in large letters.

[Perhaps I could ask you to consider releasing them?]

"...Ahaha! You're gonna have to *make* me!" She giggled childishly. The viscount's answer was simple.

[Then you leave me little choice. There is little time, I fear, so I will make this simple.]

"Huh?"

Something was coming. The jester quickly tensed, turned her body into fog, and dispersed herself.

[If cornered, she will likely kill them all. Though they may be innocent humans. I ask that you understand that time is of the essence.]

'So this is what the viscount is like.'

'He really is strange.'

'How could this happen?'

'How...'

Several large bubbles began growing before her eyes. They looked like red globules, quickly expanding into the air. They began to swallow the fog around them whole.

'This is bad, this is bad.'

'He caught me. He actually caught me.'

'What do I do? I can't materialize. I'm spread out too thin.'

'Oh no, oh no... the fog... I'm being absorbed into the bubble!'

'No, please, no...'



'I don't want to disappear.

'I don't want to die. I don't want to die yet.

'Please. No. I have to save Master Watt.

'Oh, I can't even say anything... I can't even scream for help. I can't even apologize.

'Please. Just let me say one thing. Just one thing is enough. Please.

'Master Watt, you have to get away. Master Watt, that girl—'

†

"Should I just break all their legs? In the worst-case scenario, I'm going to end up having to kill them all..."

Shizune spent some time evading the humans' attacks, surveying the situation.

"...?"

But suddenly, the humans stopped in their tracks and collapsed where they stood one by one, as though they had been hit with tranquilizer darts.

Remaining cautious, Shizune examined one of them and came to the conclusion that they were merely unconscious.

Not knowing what had happened, she decided for now to go to the vampiric presence she was sensing.

Floating on the balcony connecting the kitchen to the outside was a strange bubble.

A bright red orb about ten meters in diameter was silently floating in midair.

The moment Shizune stepped towards it, the bubble collapsed and regained its liquid form, spreading over the balcony floor.

A hat fell on the floor where the bubble had been floating moments earlier.

It was the distinctive cap worn by the jester girl.

"...Is it really all right for a 'gentleman aristocrat' to kill a girl in cold blood?"

[I assure you that she did not suffer.]

"I can't say that I think as well of you as I did earlier... but thank you."

Shizune spun the abandoned hat around her finger, sighed, and smiled gently.

Seconds later, she heard something crashing from beneath the balcony.

†

On the mountain path.

"What is this, a sci-fi? Or a fantasy?"

As they faced down Val, who was transforming into a giant of a man before their eyes, Michael turned to Ferret with a strained smile.

"...Horror, perhaps." Ferret replied, not a hint of humor in her tone. She faced down her enemy and tried to think.

If she were to fight a human, the differences in their statures would mean nothing to her. Unfortunately, their foe was a vampire who seemed to have already shrugged off the punch she had landed on him with all her strength.

"This is crazy! Isn't he going against conservation of mass? Or is he all hollow inside?"

"Please stop shouting needlessly."

"Okay."

Michael silenced himself and turned his attention to the vampire before them, making sure to stick close by Ferret's side.

"Heh heh heh... Who'm I s'pposed to beat down?" Val said, having completed his transformation into the giant. He took a step forward.

"A-all right, I'll be your opponeeeee-?!"

Michael took a courageous step forward, but he was picked up by the collar by an invisible force before he could even reach Val. The force threw him into the woods.

"...Telekinesis."

Ferret's eyes narrowed even more.

Her attacks would not work.

She knew nothing about her foe's weaknesses.

She would be impeded by a certain oblivious young man.

Waldstein Castle was only a stone's throw away.

Gathering her thoughts with these facts in mind, Ferret instantly came up with a plan of action.

"We will flee."

"Awesome! ...Wait, what?!"

Ferret immediately took hold of Michael in one arm and sprinted towards the castle at full speed.

"Hm?! Hold it!"

Val, taken by surprise at Ferret's course of action, hurriedly followed after her. However, the giant's form was not suited to running. Michael, being carried with his feet pointing towards the castle, saw the scene and thought that they could get to safety with ease.

But a moment later, the creature changed.

"Stop right there, please!"

It suddenly became faster, and at the same time Michael found himself hearing a very familiar voice.

Approaching them from further back on the mountain path was—

"Whoa! This isn't good, Ferret! *You're coming after us!* Am I supposed to be happy or what?"

"...Are you asking me to drop you, Michael?" Ferret said, and stole a glance backwards. She was now being chased by her own self. And if they were physically on even ground, Ferret, with her extra burden, was at a disadvantage.

'But of all things, to take on my form... how sickening.'

There was still some distance between them, but any closer and Val could use telekinesis to trip her over.

Abandoning Michael would guarantee that she escaped, but—

"Do not let go!"

'I could never do such a thing. I would not dream of it.'

But in contrast to Ferret's grim determination, Michael lightheartedly took out his cell phone from his breast pocket and laughed.

"Sweet, that fake Ferret is smiling! Better grab a picture!"

'One more act of idiocy, and I will drop him!' Ferret resolved even more grimly than before. She could hear a mechanical sound effect from beside her. And—

"DON'T!"

She heard a scream, sounding much like her own voice at a slightly higher pitch.

"What? What was that?" Ferret wondered, and looked back once more. Val, who was still in her form, had stopped dead in his tracks with his arms before him as though trying to shield his face.

"Michael! What did you do?!"

"Uh, I was just taking a pic... huh? What's this?" Michael said suddenly, as though he had seen something strange. His eyes went back and forth from the picture displayed on his phone to the fake Ferret standing behind them.

And—

"DON'T LOOK AT ME!"

With an anguished scream, a creature with monstrously long arms and legs began approaching them at breakneck speed. Val, who was only moments ago in Ferret's form, had transformed into the fastest shape he could think of, a jumble of inhuman features.

"Ack! Something's coming, Ferret! It's huge!"

"I know!"

"Don't worry about me, Ferret! Save yourse-!"

'Why does he never think about what he is saying?!'

"You finish that sentence, and I'll lop off your head, Michael!" Ferret yelled at the top of her lungs.



Just then, the rear balcony of Waldstein Castle came into view. Strangely enough, a red orb was floating just above it.

"It's Father!" Ferret exclaimed.

The red orb popped at that very moment, but it was not far to the castle.

There were ten meters left. By the time the back door came into view, an invisible force pulled at Ferret's leg.

"Eeek!"

With an uncharacteristic scream, Ferret, still holding Michael, rolled all the way to the underside of the balcony.

"Oof!"

Michael was the first to hit the wall, softening the impact for Ferret. She got to her feet instantly.

"Are you okay?"

"More or less..." Michael grinned, to Ferret's relief. She turned from her trembling friend to the creature that had appeared before them.

Val had returned to taking the form of a young boy. He looked upon Ferret and Michael with a mix of anger and fear.

"...Did you see me?" The glassy-eyed boy asked nervously, instead of attacking them.

"Huh?"

"Did you see it? My true form."

Michael wondered for a moment how he should answer, before finally deciding to be honest. He nodded.

The boy's hands curled into fists.

"What do you think of my appearance, human?" The boy asked.

Michael fell into thought once more, then came up with a rather strange answer.

"Well... I'd say... delicious...? Or cute, maybe?"

"Do you think that I am a vampire? A being with an ego—self-awareness?"

As the rage in Val's eyes subsided, it gave way to something that looked like terror.

"...Yeah. If that's what you want, then you must have it. I mean, if you didn't have self-awareness, you wouldn't be talking to me right now, would you?"

"Wait a second! What are you talking about?!" Ferret cried in confusion.

Then—

[My, my. A lady mustn't raise her voice so, Ferret.]

Words of blood written in German descended before Ferret's eyes.

"Father!"

"Viscount Waldstein, sir!"

With that, a great deal of blood spilled from the balcony. It would have been a shocking sight for those who were not in the know, but the ghastly scene heralded hope for the two who already knew of the viscount's form.

[When did you return from your trip? And without a word to your own father!]

"Pardon? I do believe we wrote to you last month, Father."

Looking at Ferret's confused expression, the viscount remembered what kind of a situation he was currently in.

[Hm? Now that I think on it... For how long have I been trapped in my coffin?]

"Trapped? What do you mean?"

Still in mutual confusion, the viscount suddenly came up with a new exclamation.

[Ah, this is most unusual.] He addressed Val, who had been hanging back.

[It is most uncommon to see one such as yourself. A friend of Ferret, I presume? If so, you are a most welcome guest. Make yourself at home.]

"Wha...?"

Val stood in confusion. Then he froze.

[But I must ask you one thing. What in the world were you doing with those good Saints earlier today?]

"...!"

Val shivered, understanding the implications behind the viscount's question. He was currently in the form of a little boy, looking completely unlike the young exterminator from earlier. So how did the viscount know he was the same person?

[I see... Of course. You control others' sense of sight with your soul, making it appear as though you are capable of transformation. All the while, manipulating tools with telekinesis as a normal human might... Apologies, being in this eyeless body, I perceive the world through my soul directly. Your form is always consistent to my sight.]

"S-so... you can see me... you... my true form..."

[You may call it a 'true form', but you have only ever had one form, as far as I could perceive.]

Reading this, Val, in the form of the little boy, began trembling.

"No... don't... don't... look at me..."

His teeth chattered, and he suddenly shook his head in terror.

"Don't don't don't don't don't don't look nobody look don't look at me! Don't look at the real me I I I I I'm right here! I think for myself! This is the only me, I am my only soul!" He began babbling incoherently.

[Ah... I see his ego has not yet stabilized.]

The viscount approached him to calm him down. However—

"No... NOOOOOOO! Don't look at me, don't look at me, don't look at me!"

With a terrible scream, Val turned tail and fled into the distance.

Ferret, who had been watching this sight for the past ten minutes, utterly lost in confusion, had only one thing to say.

"...What was that all about?"

†

Hilda's house.

How could I have been so shameless?

Telling Ferret "Just be yourself", when I'm the one who took away that freedom from her in the first place.

She was placed with me so she could become my scapegoat, and I came out of it with all our parents' abilities. And I still called myself her older brother.

And since I've taken all of their weaknesses, I've even taken away her freedom to die.

"Relic? Snap out of it, Relic!"

I'm sorry, Hilda. I want to suck your blood, but that's probably because someone programmed that thought into me.

Is the me that's thinking right now... really me?

Damn it... damn it... I never took it seriously when I saw stories about AI and robots that wrestle with their sense of self, but I had no idea I'd feel so terrible when I learned the truth.

I think. Therefore I exist. But what if even this is something someone programmed into me beforehand?

And before all that... since I was born that way, am I even a living creature to begin with?

"Relic! Relic!"

But I know what I have to do. First, I'll get Hilda somewhere safe. I have to protect her from this man.

"Do you think you could do such a thing?"

Damn it. He's saying something again. Don't listen to him. Don't listen to anything. Just think of protecting Hilda.

"You are neither human nor vampire, created as an idol. The fruit of one sinful vampire's research. You have been created upon the sacrifices of hundreds upon thousands of vampires. Do you know what that means?"

Stop it. Shut up. Damn it. Every time I try to do something—every time I almost snap out of it, he opens his mouth and ruins everything. I have to make him shut up, but my soul won't listen to me. I can't turn my body into bats. I can't visualize my self. I can't get a picture of what I look like.

Damn it. What's going on? I turn into flocks of bats all the time. All of a sudden I feel like my body belongs to someone else.

"In other words, you are like a god to us. You have the power to reign over others. You are the closest being on this earth to true freedom. Do you understand? How do you feel? Born, most fortunately, to become the perfect being, the product of centuries' worth of research. Do you know what this means for you?"

Stop it stop it stop it stop trying to confuse me. Just think of protecting Hilda. Just think of taking down this man—

"You don't know?"

Why aren't you talking to me...?

Hilda?

"You're asking if he knows what that means? You don't get it, do you? You don't know anything."

"Who do you think you are, butting into this conversation?"

"Relic's childhood friend! You have a problem with that?!" Hilda declared, glaring at the Asian man.

I've never seen Hilda this angry.

Who is she doing this for? Me? It can't be. But that doesn't matter. You have to get away, Hilda. No. I have to get her away.

"I'll answer your question for Relic."

Thanks, Hilda. But what are you going to say?

You could say 'Relic is still Relic', or 'Only Relic can decide what he's worth', but answers like that won't work.

But thank you. I don't care what you tell him. Because just hearing your voice in that answer might help me get back on my feet. So right now, I just want to hear what you have to say.

"All right, I'll say it. If what you said is true, and Relic is the result of those vampires' experiments..."

...

"If he's an idol, not just a human or vampire, and if he really was made through hundreds of sacrifices..."

...Hilda?

"If he's a god, or a devil... If he's just lucky, or if he's the perfect existence!

"That means he's unbeatable."

"Whether it's vampires or humans or hundreds of others from the past! Whether it's himself or someone else! And even if he's facing off against *words*! It means he can never lose!

"I'm saying that Relic could never lose to your *words*!"

-----!



†

The moment Hilda stepped in front of him to protect him and declare her faith in him, Relic came to a sudden realization. He realized that he had never really liked or disliked Hilda.

He also realized that, at that very moment, he had truly fallen in love with her.

A bat flew past him.

Dozens of bats rose up from the doorway. One of them grazed the Magic Man's face.

"...Where did these bats come from?!"

Relic's body showed no signs of having transformed. Setting that aside, after Hilda's declaration, he had stopped trembling and gritting his teeth. He merely knelt there with his head bowed. As the Magic Man fell under the impression that time had stopped around him, he noticed that Relic was standing.

The Magic Man had not missed the moment of Relic getting to his feet. It felt like he had watched a film strip that had cut away very suddenly.

He could not have been mistaken. A vampire like him, focusing his senses to the utmost limits, could not have missed something like this, the Magic Man told himself, but the reality before him had already shifted. Relic was now holding Hilda in his arms.

Hilda's answer was so simple and straightforward that Relic had never even considered it.

But it was enough for him. It was the answer he was looking for.

"Hilda." Relic whispered, embracing her tightly. "Thank you. I think I'll be okay now. I'm sorry. Before, I wanted to protect you as best I could. But now I want to protect you with all I have. I promise. I'll give it my all."

With this, he gently put his mouth to her neck.

At that very moment, hundreds—no, thousands—of bats emerged from the walls, floor, and the ceiling and covered the house in a cloak of black, with Relic and Hilda at the centre of the maelstrom.

"It can't be... Has he synchronized his body with this entire house?!"

Many vampires could turn even their clothing and accessories into bats when they transformed. And depending on their powers, some could even turn their vehicles—cars, motorcycles, and the like—into bats alongside themselves.

"No... The entire manor?! This is unheard of!"

However, the Magic Man was mistaken.

It was because he was inside the manor that he never realized what was happening—to the city, and the entire island.

"...!"

Shizune Kijima, who had been walking through Waldstein Castle, suddenly felt a chill at the sudden expansion of vampiric presence.

She looked outside from a nearby balcony. The nearest streetlamp was dim, and the city lights that should have been visible in the distance were not there.

She could sense a powerful vampiric presence. However, she could not pinpoint its location.

To make a comparison, it was similar to when the jester had transformed herself into fog. But this sensation was on a different scale altogether.

Shizune then realized that the streets, the forest, and the castle were being enveloped in a thick fog.

At that very moment, the island of Growerth was mired in fog, the likes of which had never been observed in the past.

[Ah, this is Relic's doing, I presume?]

"Has Honored Brother caused all this?"

[Ah, Ferret. As I recall, even your parents had synchronized with this entire castle in the past. But to think there could be such a range of differences in power among us vampires...]

As the viscount and Ferret stood at the back of the castle, the sudden fog covered even the stars in the sky. It felt as though everything around them would soon sink into darkness. Countless bats were gathering in the air, pitch-black flocks swarming like mosquitoes.

"I don't really get it, but..." Michael said, looking up at the scene. "Is this the kind of power you want, Ferret?"

Ferret gaped for a moment.

"Sometimes, you pose the most uncomfortable questions."

"...Sorry."

As the mysterious fog rolled over the entire island, one man remained absolutely calm.

Watt Stalf quietly took off his sunglasses and looked over at the flocks of bats rising up from the ground.

"So the final boss shows itself." The most petty of men said, enjoying the situation more than anyone.

"...This is power, huh? This is the apex of all vampiric abilities? Synchronizing yourself with the entire island, and if you wanted, you could turn the whole damned thing into a gigantic wolf that could destroy the world in a single night." He snickered. Watt then looked up into the sky resolutely.

"Why does uselessly great power have to be so damned beautiful?"

Reaching out his hands towards the fog and the bats covering the sky, Watt uttered in a childlike tone:

"...I'm in love. Hey, Power. I'm falling in love with you all over again."

"W-wait a moment!"

Standing in stark contrast to Watt's serenity was the Magic Man, who was the most anxious person on the island despite being witness to only the smallest fraction of Relic's display of power.

"Wait please I'm sorry I'll tell you the truth I thought I could defeat you by crushing your will but please believe me I was just being young and rash, I thought I might give you a little nudge— This is cheating! It's too much! You're only supposed to use this power against the final boss, or some global threat! You could beat me without even trying! So why are you doing this to me? I haven't killed your friends or loved ones, or anything!"

As the Magic Man rambled in half-defeat, Relic silently stepped towards him.

'I'm finished. It's all over. I never thought it would come to this. I was sure I could get away, even on the off-chance that he used his powers. But it's done now. What kind of power could steal even my strength to run?'

The flock of bats, looking as though they could swallow up the world around them, were clearing a path for Relic and Hilda.

"No, a Magic Man should never lose his composure." Relic said in a surprisingly calm voice, putting a hand up to the Magic Man's face.

"But since your magic really has no tricks, maybe I should call you a Magician."

"Oh..."

To think that, of all people, the boy before him would call him what he had wanted to hear all along.

'So Lady Luck's finally abandoned me...'

Strangely enough, the moment he heard Relic's words, the Magic Man found himself in a serene state.

'Damn it. Maybe she'd left me the moment I gave up on being human.'

"Three."

The moment he heard that voice, the Magic Man realized something.

"Two."

'Oh... I'm going to be erased.'

"One."

The countdown was going, driven not by the Magic Man, but Relic. Perhaps, the Magic Man thought, that his instincts as a vampire were trying to help him accept his demise.

'Come to think of it, when was the last time I actually performed a genuine magic trick—'

"Zero."

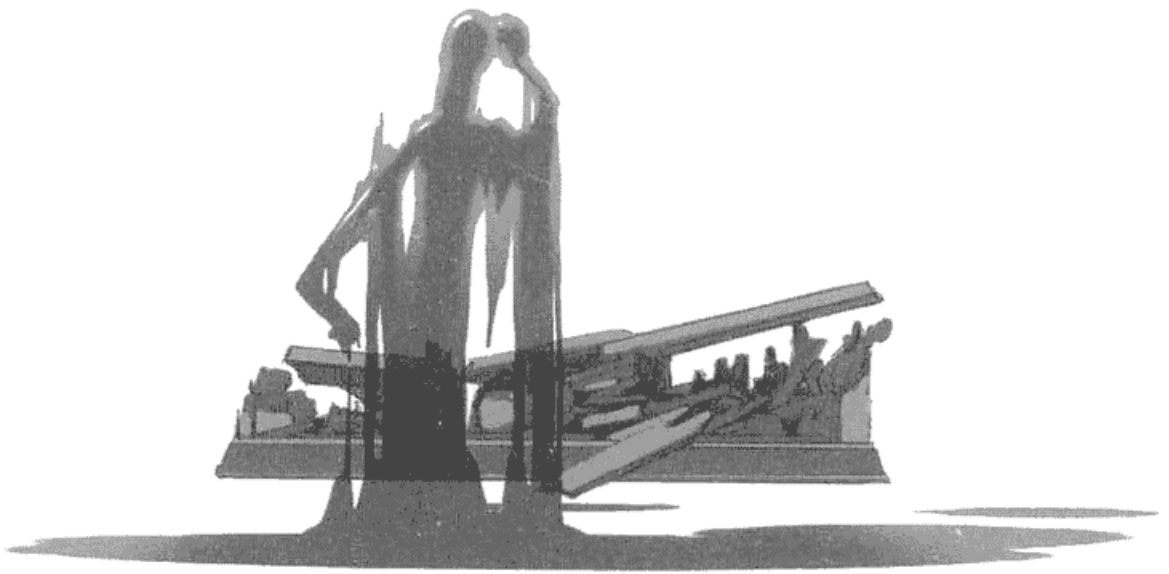
Before he could even think of the answer, the Magic Man disappeared.

On the floor where he had been standing a moment ago was a gaping hole the size of a bathtub, its edges lined with countless wolf's teeth. They clattered against one another excitedly, as though welcoming their new meal.

It was almost as though they were applauding.

3章

棺に満ちる紅色紳士



Chapter 3: The Gentleman Filling the Coffin

Let me tell you about Father.

Father is a gentleman.

He's always dramatic, and he often makes people angry because he ruins the mood or makes mistakes. But I still call him a gentleman.

Father always bluffs his way through things. He's no good at fighting. That's why he uses underhanded tactics sometimes, though he'll always call it 'strategy'.

I guess in that sense he's not a gentleman at all.

But that doesn't matter.

There's one thing about Father that makes me truly respect him as a gentleman.

You see, Father will *a/ways* make things work somehow, whenever and wherever.

No matter what situation he's in—even when most people would give up—as long as it's not something impossible like raising the dead, he'll make things work.

That's right. I can't really put it into words, but I respect him.

I respect him.

I may have power, but I can never solve anything myself.

I don't want to have power.

I just want to be able to do something about everything that happens in front of me.

The house was quiet, as though nothing had ever happened. Relic and Hilda were leaning on each other's shoulders.

"Say, Hilda. Sorry about before."

"About what?"

"I drank a bit of your blood."

"I don't really mind."

There was a moment of silence before Relic awkwardly spoke up again.

"Say, Hilda. Sorry about before."

"About what?"

"When you were yelling at that guy, I assumed that what you said wouldn't help me, before I even heard it. I didn't believe in you. I'm sorry."

"I wouldn't even have known that if you hadn't said anything, you know..."

There was another moment of silence.

"Hilda! I-I'm sorry!"

"A-about what?"

"I forgot about your parents!"

It seemed that even Hilda had needed a reminder. She quickly got to her feet in the hallway.

"Oh no! Dad! Mom!"

As Hilda burst into tears, Relic truly understood his powerlessness.

"L-let's head to the castle first. These people are all vampires, so I'm sure Father can do something!"

He felt foolish for having to turn to his father in the end.

"Y-yeah... I'm sure he could do something..."

And he was indescribably miserable because even Hilda was relying on his father.

†

Waldstein Castle, parlor.

It was just about midnight. The viscount formed sentences in the air in an unnecessarily dramatic font.

[My word, to think you would be so swept away by power that you would lose sight of your duty...]

"...You don't need to put it that gravely." Relic said as he sipped his tea, his eyes on the floor and embarrassment clear on his face.

He felt incredibly weary. It was only natural, seeing as he had sucked very little blood from Hilda while having expended so much power.

[I am ashamed of you, Relic! It is most fortunate that I was present to save Hilda's parents. What would you have done if we'd been left without a single lead?]

"...Sorry."

In the end, they found Hilda's parents hiding in the castle.

From the sounds of things, a friend of the Magic Man had subjugated Hilda's parents after Hilda and Michael left their house. Hilda had been so rattled by the fact that her parents had hired exterminators to kill the viscount that she was refusing to speak to them.

"But I honestly have no idea what's going on. What happened here?"

[Ah, as long as Watt himself remains unaccounted for, we cannot understand the reasons behind this incident.]

"And also... uh, never mind."

[They say that a true gentleman must always make his intentions clear, my son. Take these words to heart.]

Relic could no longer escape. Making sure that Ferret was not in the room, Relic asked his father for a word of confirmation.

"Father, did you know that I was created artificially?"

[But of course!]

The viscount's incredibly confident answer left Relic in confusion.

[Ah, I understand what you are trying to say. First: I never told you because you never asked. I saw no need to disclose the truth behind a matter in which you expressed no interest. Second: Although you may wish to ask if your heart is real, I will say to you that even a thoroughbred horse has the freedom to walk of its own will. And thirdly: I presume you will want to ask if an amalgamation of power like you has the right to live a normal life. But would you also say that a bull terrier has no right to live?]

Relic's questions were answered before he could even ask them.

"...That's enough."

Relic collapsed into his seat and waved his hand lightly. Father and son had been reunited after a year, and he had many things he wanted to say—but right now, he wasn't in the mood. He was itching to talk to Hilda.

[Is that all? Even I am aware of the many gaping holes in my answers. It would be enjoyable in itself to point them out together and slowly come to a mutual understanding.]

Deciding to ignore the work before him, which might keep them all up through the night, Relic again explained the details of the incident.

Ferret and Michael had just come inside, and Hilda was with her parents in the next room over. Relic wondered if her silent treatment of them had come to an end by now.

"So what about Watt Stalf?"

Even Relic had heard of Watt before. In fact, most people on Growerth knew his name, because he was the mayor of Rukram. There was word going around about his surprisingly youthful looks for a man in his thirties, but this was the first time Relic had heard that the mayor was a dhampyr.

[That is the problem. Even though things have come to this, I still have no idea what that man intends. What good would come out of releasing me from my prison, when he was the one who sealed me away in the first place? Now, if my release has meaning of some sort, from his personality, I can only assume that this was all an act of boasting on his part.]

"What are you talking about?"

[Watt Stalf is a petty man. A man who will stop at nothing to reach the top. The sort to go out of his way to humiliate a defeated man and revel in the man's resentful anger. I have known Watt for quite some time now, you see. I first saw him in a back alley, gloating over the collapsed form of a dying drug addict, having robbed him of his money.]

"That's terrible."

Relic wondered how a man like him had ever become a mayor.

But all too suddenly, a gunshot echoed through the castle.

"?! That was from the ballroom!"

The viscount lithely slid down the floor and appeared at the top of the ballroom staircase.

It was an open area, with the stairs located at the central corner. Normally there would have been a great chandelier hanging from the ceiling, but it had been shattered by the custom-made explosive stakes fired by the extermination team that the jester had subjugated. Its remains lay in the middle of the room—the rest of the ballroom also showed signs of having been damaged by explosions.

Because there were multiple lights installed in the hall, the room was still illuminated. But the eerie air in the room left the atmosphere cold and tense.

Hilda's parents were sitting in a corner, screaming. Their eyes were locked on a scene right out of a cheap police drama.

A man wearing sunglasses stood before the fallen chandelier, twirling a smoking pistol.

"Mayday, mayday. Now, Count! It's time for Part Two."

He was wearing a pair of jeans and a leather jacket. Watt Stalf, the mayor of Rukram who wore a different face entirely during the day, was twirling his gun in a flashy show of dexterity.

The viscount's family and Michael were the only ones who had come down from the parlor. And not a single one of them was distracted by the gun itself.

And once Watt confirmed that their attention was focused on Hilda's face, at which the gun was aimed, he announced the opening of the show.

He spoke in a tone entirely different from that of a petty criminal. Not only that, plastered on his face was a refreshing smile that he might wear for a school visit during an election campaign.

"Just like I promised. I'm here to crawl up to the top."

[...I had always known that you were a petty man, but have you fallen so far so as to lose your mind?] The pool of blood wrote out in astonishment, sliding down the staircase. [I cannot say I have any idea what you are attempting to do. And allow me to remind you that I am a *viscount*.]

"Really? Quit your complaining. I thought it was pretty damned easy to see, *Count*. Here I have a gun and a hostage. How much more simple could you get?"

Twirling the gun again, Watt glanced around the ballroom. Noticing the small steps at the very front of the room, on the opposite side of the ballroom from the larger staircase, he briskly walked towards it. Taking the gun away from Hilda's head, he pulled her along as though escorting a dance partner.

Hilda naturally resisted. But perhaps Watt had been using her elbow as a fulcrum—his incredible strength did not allow her to put up much of a struggle.

Lightly taking a seat on one of the lower steps, he shot a glance over at those at the top of the staircase on the other side of the room, and the letters of blood floating before the chandelier. He kept a tight hold on Hilda's wrist.

"Count. I'm here to have a nice long talk with you."

[I understand wholeheartedly. But first, I ask that you release the young lady. I shall gladly offer myself as a hostage!]

"You're still one hell of an idiot. How the fuck am I supposed to hold a glob of blood hostage? And what good is a hostage that can't even die?"

[You misunderstand greatly, Watt. I guarantee you that, were I to be stuffed into a rocketship and launched into the sun, I would be killed. Immortality is not so easily found! So, might I ask that you release the young lady? If you do so, I may still accept you as a guest to my castle.]

The mismatched pair continued their conversation. The humans and vampires around them looked incredulous, and even Relic, whose girlfriend had been taken hostage, was mesmerized by the sight.

"A guest, huh? Right. That's pretty decent."

As soon as he finished his sentence, Watt released his iron grip on Hilda's wrist.

Hilda hurriedly fled, rushing to Relic at the other end of the room. Her parents also ran to her in panic but Hilda clung to Relic, trembling. The girl who had showed no fear before vampires was scared to the core by the threat of a gun.

[Hm?]

Even the viscount seemed surprised by Watt's course of action. He grew ever more cautious of the man.

[What do you mean by this? What is your purpose? ...Have you truly surrendered? Well, I suppose if you have learned your lesson, I could support you wholeheartedly during the next municipal election.]

"That's pretty damn sweet. City council's full of geezers, but I can't ignore your loyal citizens. I was this close to losing last time because of that."

With a self-deprecating smile, Watt quietly raised the gun.

"Besides, what good's a hostage now?" He said, aiming at the letters of blood and pulling the trigger.

Click. Click. Click.

From the gun came, not bullets, but dull clicking.

Watt opened the cylinder. The bullets fell, each round damp with blood. The red splotches separated from the bullets on the ground and returned to the viscount's main body.

"Quick as ever, Count. Dampening my fucking bullets before I do anything." Watt spat resentfully, throwing the gun itself at the viscount.

[You worry me, mayor. You show a distinct lack of pettiness today, and that troubles me greatly.]

"What can I say? I'm feeling pretty good. I feel so good it's almost lethal. It was pretty shitty earlier today, getting ignored by my numbskull underlings and smashing my cell phone. But what happened just earlier cleared that all up. Now *that* was one hell of a show. Almost applauded. Looks like ol' Melhilm's research wasn't for nothing after all." Watt said, quietly turning to Relic.

"I mean, I've always been after him, but now I'm serious. Relic von Waldstein, the perfected product. The revival of a legend that never existed. The Relict. The one-man apocalypse."

[I must object to that final descriptor.]

"Shut up. Anyway... I'll apologize 'bout pouring liquid nitrogen into your coffin last month. It was a waste of time and effort, anyway."

The viscount's memory seemed to have been spurred by Watt's comment.

[Of course! So it was you after all! I'd thought it strange that I could not move, but by then I had been sealed inside by some sort of rosin.... I would have lost my energy entirely if I had been inside any longer!]

"Cut the complaining. Just be thankful I didn't sink you into the ocean because I didn't want to risk breaking your coffin open. So, what do you say? Any chance of getting your kid to share some of that power with me?"

[Your penchant for making impossible demands has not changed, I see. Ah, finally back to your old petty self.]

As Watt and the viscount went on about apologies and whatnot, the topic of their discussion—Relic—watched in silence.

[And in any event, how in the world would you go about transferring this power? Abilities are not known to be transferrable between vampires, even through biting... Hm? Then what, pray tell, did Melhilm intend for my son? Not a coup d'etat with Relic at its centre, I presume?]

Watt chuckled.

"Let's just say there's a way to copy someone's abilities now. And what would you think if I told you that this method transfers the abilities, but not the weaknesses? A way that would allow anyone in possession of Relic to create a legend."

[Preposterous! What is this]

But the moment the viscount began to ask, an even more surprising visitor entered the ballroom.

"About that."

Standing with one arm around the railings was a voluptuous young woman of Japanese descent.

"...? Who's that?" Michael asked Ferret, not a hint of tension in his tone. But she stiffly kept her gaze on the newcomer.

Relic also looked at Shizune, but she was looking straight at the viscount.

"I think *I* booked the first appointment with the viscount's son." she said slowly.

Relic and Ferret, who could both understand Japanese, looked at their father in surprise.

Shizune Kijima, the Eater, simply turned towards Relic.

[...Still fearless of misunderstandings, I see. Where have you been all this time, might I ask?] The viscount asked, taken aback. Shizune faced down the vampires and spoke plainly.

"Viscount, I have a full-course meal right in front of my eyes. Are you really going to try and stop me now?"

[A moment, please. I ask that you release yourself from this tension. They say that relaxation is the best medicine for a broken heart, do they not?]

Shizune thought for a moment, then came up with a proposal.

"Right. I owe you from before, too. Then how about this? I sensed four vampires here in this room. I'll settle for eating just *one* of them. So which will it be? It's your choice, viscount."

The word 'eat' seemed to have surprised Ferret. She turned to the viscount.

"Father, who in the world is this woman?"

There was a tinge of anxiety in her incredulous expression. The viscount attempted to respond reassuringly in bold letters, but only ended up fanning the flames of fear.

[There is nothing to worry about, Ferret. Should that woman set her sights on you, you and Relic must flee this place. Do you understand?]

As though making fun of the sight, Watt adjusted his sunglasses and spoke up.

"Well isn't that interesting, eh? Who's it gonna be, Count?"

"I am a *viscount*, Watt... Hm? You understand the Japanese language?]

"Rukram's sister cities with Hagane City in Japan. You know I can speak it a little, since I went back and forth even before I became mayor. Then again, unlike you fucking vampires, my brain's wired so it takes me *years* to learn any of these goddamned languages. But that doesn't matter." Watt shook his head. "I understand. That woman is serious. Gotta be, or else you wouldn't tell your brats to run. But you know, if you only need to sacrifice one... Then you'd pick me, wouldn't you? Interesting. All right, pick me." Watt said confidently, almost daring the viscount to choose. However—

[**I refuse!**] The viscount uttered finally, and wrote out a short message to Shizune in Japanese.

[Miss Shizune, I ask that you devour me!]

"What?!"

"Father!"

"Father?!"

The other vampires were shocked. But the viscount continued writing on the floor confidently, as though his choice was only natural.

[I have just now sworn to accept the good mayor as my guest! As lord over this castle, I bear the responsibility of ensuring the safety of my guest Watt Stalf!]

"Not again, Father..." Ferret mumbled incredulously, but her eyes never left Shizune, who remained standing at the top of the stairs. Something about her bothered Ferret—the incredibly cold air she wove around herself, for one, but there was something else.

'There's something familiar about that woman...'

"Oh, is that all right?" Shizune asked for confirmation. The viscount did not even respond, leaving his form prone on the floor. "I'm going to warn you, it's not gonna end with just a bite. It's not gonna end until I've eaten every last bit of you. Are you seriously all right with that? Not scared at all?"

[Naturally, I intend to resist. But if you wish to challenge me to an official duel, then as per traditional rules of engagement against a woman, I shall bury my lower body in the earth before our battle.]

"...Remember how I said that I didn't dislike you?" Shizune said, slightly remorseful. But she did not seem to be inclined to change her mind.

As they slowly began to tense, a vulgar burst of laughter interrupted them.

"So the girl in white and the count are planning on going at each other's throats?"

Watt stood from his seat on the stair, joining in on Shizune's game.

"In other words, that leaves Relic for me, right?" He returned to the original topic. The viscount hurriedly composed his thoughts as though trying to solve the situation.

[Wait a moment! I shall have a listen to your story at a later time. I do not believe your powers will be enough to even harm my boy. Is that not why you took Hilda hostage to begin with?]

It was a natural point to make, but Watt shook his head.

His strangely calm smile began to show a hint of something resembling madness. His mouth was twisted into a grin that showed off his fangs.

"I thought I told you, Count."

A moment later, countless shadows formed spread from his body.

"I'm here to crawl to the top!"

Watt's body scattered into dozens of bats, like an explosion of black. As the shadows flitted around the ballroom, the pool of blood splashed in shock.

[My word! I do not recall you being able to use many vampiric abilities, let alone turn yourself into flocks of bats! And I *do* recall... My memories do not lie!]

The viscount's body trembled, as though displaying bewilderment, and formed words in midair as though exploding.

[How could I forget those human-eyed bats? That is Melhilm's ability!]

The moment the viscount displayed his words, written in a font representing his surprise, three forks with strangely thick handles drove themselves into his main body on the floor.

[Urgh! Miss Shizune, I believe I've already told you that electricity will not]

The letters of blood hovering in midair tried to form new words, but their movements suddenly ceased.

The blood pooled around the three forks began to go rigid. Frost began to form on the surface.

The frost spread incredibly quickly. The viscount struggled to detach a part of his body from the ice, but the ice continued encroaching, unwilling to release the blood into the air.

Several seconds later, the viscount's body froze over in a form that made it look like icicles were growing into the air from the floor.

"Father!" Ferret cried, and tried to run to the viscount's side. But a table knife suddenly drove itself into the floor right before her foot.

"...!"

Ferret was unable to react when Shizune threw the knife. By the time she was aware that Shizune had moved, the knife was already in the floor.

Ferret ground her teeth and glared at Shizune, who smiled faintly.

"You're gonna get yourself burned if you touch that. Although I doubt I'd even let you get that far."

As the bats chattered mockingly, Shizune changed her tone slightly.

"This time I'll go for that boy beside you."

Shizune glanced at Michael. A determined look came over Ferret's face as she stood to shield him.

"Fe-"

"Please, do not say anything! Even I cannot understand why I am doing this!"

"...Okay."

"How sweet." Shizune mumbled, a soft smile on her lips. It was such a natural grin that anyone who had seen her discussion with the viscount earlier would have found it difficult to believe that she was the same person.

Which one was the true Shizune? The viscount, who had witnessed both of her faces, did not seem to have the strength to say.

The part of the blood that had been forming words in midair had managed to escape being frozen. But it fell powerlessly at a slight distance from the pillars of ice.

The viscount squirmed rather weakly, addressing Shizune.

[...Some sort of liquid nitrogen? But why did you not use this during our first battle?]

"I was waiting for your kids to get here." Shizune answered.

The viscount was slow to form the rest of his questions; proof that his strength grew weak.

[What... are you saying? I do not believe you knew of my children until after our ceasefire.]

It was a question meant for confirmation. The answer, however, did not come from Shizune, but the silhouette forming beside her.

"What, you don't get it, Count? Someone who's lived fucking years—decades—*centuries* longer than me seriously can't put two and two together?"

The bats gathered beside Shizune, as Watt Stalf reassembled his body next to her.

He sneered and gave an answer in Shizune's place.

"It means *this*."

The mayor reached out an arm from behind her and dramatically took her in his embrace.

It was clearly not a gesture of romance, but ownership.

But Shizune—

The Eater accepted it with a smile.

[Of course.]

The letters of blood reacted simply.

[You knew each other beforehand.]

Laughing like a third-rate villain, Watt began to reveal his plot to the letters of blood.

"Hahah! Ahaha! Hahahahahahahahahahaha! I planned it all, from the very start! This is my trump card. I'm not a goddamned idiot; there's no way my flunkies could've taken you on."

Despite the fact that Watt was essentially treating her like a tool, Shizune did not react.

"Hey, hey, hey. You telling me you seriously had no idea? You thought Shizune coming to this island was a coincidence? You think she took her sweet time listenin' to your fucking legends because she happened to be feeling nice today? You think she ate Melhilm by coincidence?"

[So does this have to do with the fact that you are wielding Melhilm's powers?]

"I told you, there's a way to transfer power between vampires. A vampire drinking another vampire's blood won't work; some sort of rejection on the level of the soul. But you already know that, don't you? Fucking Count. This soul that flows in our blood is fickle. The rejection between vampires happens because the wavelengths of the soul are different. But you know, once those abilities pass through a human, the human's blood acts like an adhesive. The power *sticks*." Watt went on at length, looking as though he was truly enjoying himself.

"You get it now? Eaters. When you drink the blood of an Eater who's just eaten a vampire's flesh and blood, you gain the vampire's abilities. Melhilm noticed that, you know. That's why he went after your son. To take on Relic's powers and become legendary! And now I'm seeking that power instead. Want me to repeat that? Can you even hear me in the first place, Count?! Last time I froze you, you lasted a couple hours. What about now?!"

The viscount, who drew energy from the sun, was cornered. Not only was his body frozen solid, it was unable to provide energy to the smaller part that made up the letters.

The viscount remained rooted to the spot. Shizune smiled and spoke up, as though supplementing Watt's explanation.

"Oh, right. About that question I ignored earlier.. You asked me where I went just now, right? Where do you think I was? I was contacting Watt."

She bowed her head slightly, and put on a somewhat lonely look.

"Sorry. But I honestly enjoyed listening to your stories."

[Are you all right?]

Having been left with very few letters with which to compose sentences, the viscount wrote tersely.

[Was the story you told me a lie?]

"That was all true. And it's also true that I'm living to kill all vampires. And... that's how it still is. I let Watt off the hook because he's only half."

[I see. A relief to hear.]

With a satisfied shake, the viscount's letters reformed into sentences.

[I am glad that I do not have to feel anger at you. And forgive me for doubting you for even a moment!]

Shizune looked at his words without expression. but before she could react, Watt snorted.

"Hah! How the mighty have fallen. Even you could end up suspecting a woman's past, eh, Count?" He said, sounding almost forced. The look of disdain in his eyes shone through his sunglasses.

"Whaddaya think, Count? Humiliated? Angry? Resenting your own weakness? Every. Single. Day. You looked down on me from above. You have no idea how I've looked forward to paying you back. Ah, I shall ask. Though you may call my words third-rate and trite, I shall ask. Feeling disgraced yet, Count?! I hate losing, you know. And I make a point of paying back every last ounce of humiliation!"

[I am a *viscount*. And allow me to add that—coincidentally—I am also a man much like yourself.] The viscount's remaining pieces began, as though he had regained his power. But at that very moment—

[But I make it a point to p a y b a c k i n t r i p l e]

With that, the letters of blood fell helplessly, turning into a small stain on the floor.

The pieces of the talkative viscount would no longer move.

"Tch. Talk about an anticlimax." Watt said, dissatisfied, and turned to the people at the other end of the ballroom.

"Well, let's get to work.... Hey, hey. What're you looking at me like that for?" He laughed, fixing his sunglasses. Ferret and Relic were glaring at him.

"It's not like he's *dead*. He'll be back as soon as you thaw him out. Or are you gonna try using your powers on me, like when you erased the Magic Man? Not likely, from the looks of you. No way you could do something that big again without drinking some blood."

Watt's comment had hit the bull's eye. Relic faltered for a moment.

Satisfied at the boy's expression—a mix of fear and rage—Watt opened his arms.

"Man, you've got none of your old man's poker face. I can read you like a book."

And in preparation for getting Shizune to drink Relic's blood, he loudly called for his subordinate.

"Oy, Clown! Take the humans hostage!"

But there was no answer.

"Clown! Hey! You listening?!"

She still did not reply. Only Watt's voice echoed through the ballroom.

"...Where'd that moron get to? I told her to get to the castle by nightfall."

As Watt narrowed his eyes, Shizune quietly spoke up.

"The afterlife... I guess."

"The hell?"

As Watt turned, a red object flew by past his eyes.

It fell to the floor—a triangular hat dyed a deep red.

Watt froze.

"...What is this. Shizune. Where did you find this thing?" He asked seriously. Shizune only answered as she could.

"That clown got killed by the frozen viscount over there."

Silence. Although it was impossible to see his expression through his sunglasses, Watt was quiet for a few moments. He was not even looking at Shizune.

"Hey, hey. Cut this crap. Clown, you're supposed to always turn into fog. How the hell do you die when the sun's not even up?"

His tone was still light, but his eyes were fixed on the hat on the floor.

Shizune smiled slightly and described only the outcome.

"She must've been absorbed into the viscount's bubble without even getting a chance to materialize. I guess that's similar to drinking blood, in a sense."

"...Hold it. I told you to cut the crap. I did *not* tell her to pick a fight with the viscount."

Watt's voice began to quicken. But in contrast to his growing unease, Shizune remained inscrutable.

"I said... cut the crap. This is not funny."

Watt cut off there for a moment, before turning all the way around at the pillars of ice at the foot of the stairs.

"...Listen up! The count would *not*—! ...Gah... Urgh..."

His furious remark was cut off. Watt's eyes, hidden beneath his shades, widened in shock.

Ferret and the others happened to be facing his back head-on as he turned. And from the middle of his back—to be precise, at a spot just over his heart—something silver and red came jutting through.

It was a steak knife. With superhuman strength Shizune had forcibly driven that weapon—by no means sharp—into Watt's chest.

She pushed the knife in deep, until it pierced through and came out through his back.

"This isn't stainless steel. It's custom-made, made of pure silver. I don't have many of them, so I only use it to land the finishing blow. It's no wooden stake, so it might hurt. I'm sorry."

"You... bitch..." Watt spat hoarsely.

Blood dripped from his chest. It flowed along the grip of the knife and onto Shizune's hands.

Taking her hands off the knife, Shizune looked at the blood on her hands.

"You've surpassed your half-blood nature and become a full-fledged vampire. That already makes you my enemy."

†

The man who taught me about Eaters.

Strangely enough, he'd asked me the same question as Gerhardt did today.

"Kid, if the one who killed your family today was human, would you go on and kill every human in existence?"

"...I would." I said. I was completely honest back then. I had no suspicions about anything.

"...I like you, kid." He said, and told me about Eaters.

Then, he tore off his flesh and let me drink his blood.

Now that I think about it, that was so long ago that we didn't even have this plan in the first place.

Half man and half vampire.

Normally, someone like him would have been cast out from both worlds. Or he would have hidden himself in one or the other.

But Watt tried to become great in *both* worlds.



Not for something like justice or goodwill. It was all for his own ambitions.

For someone who never sucks up to his superiors, he uses their influence to wield power. In one sense, he's the lowest of all humans and vampires.

But by then, I'd already come to a realization about myself as an Eater. Because I realized that I was neither human nor vampire. Revenge was just an excuse. I realized that I enjoyed watching vampires fall to despair as they died. Watt's actions back then almost made me feel refreshed.

I used him, and he used me.

He would tell me where I could find powerful vampires, one by one. He was probably prioritizing the ones that posed the greatest threat to himself.

But that didn't matter. Watt and I had a purely utilitarian, symbiotic relationship.

After I ate the vampire named Melhilm, Watt drank my blood. He didn't bite me, but I cut my hand and let him drink it. So he received Melhilm's power and became a true vampire.

And now, I've stuck a knife through his heart. Because he's a vampire—a creature I have to destroy.

It was a professional relationship, but it's true we had a bond of trust.

That was why I decided to tell him.

As he fell to the floor before my eyes, I would say it.

It was not an insult. This was my duty, and a courtesy I extend to those I devour.

"Watt—Watt Stalf. Thank you for the meal."

†

Watt lay on the floor, unmoving. Shizune muttered to herself blankly.

"...Too bad. I think that clown girl actually noticed I was targeting you."

Blood was splattered all over her white jacket in a strange pattern. Shizune looked into empty space for a moment, then turned to Relic and Ferret as if she had remembered something.

"Looks like you're next. So... thinking of resisting?"

Her face was the picture of calm, but there was something clearly inhuman about the way Shizune carried herself.

Ferret did not know very much about this Eater, but her father's order to run and the fork sticking out of the ground near her feet was enough to inform her of the danger Shizune posed.

But she desperately swallowed the welling fear and feigned composure as best she could.

"Striking him as he mourned his fallen friend—an excellent tactic."

Hatred was clear in Ferret's voice, but Shizune's expression did not change.

"That's right. But it's not like I've never done this before. Wouldn't it be stranger for me to suddenly feel guilty about it?" She said, staring at Ferret with a nostalgic look. "It's only been a month, but you've lost all that bloodlust from last time. It must be because of that boy beside you, right?"

"...?"

Ferret's eyes widened as she looked directly at Shizune.

'So I have seen her before. But a month ago? Then-'

"You were watching me from the shadows like you could kill me any second. You know, that really puts a damper on things—under scrutiny like that, you can't even get a vampire to suck your blood, let alone kiss you."

'...! I remember! I met her with Relic. I'm sure of it! One month ago in Yokohama... She was wearing glasses and her hair was down, but it was this woman!'

But by the time Ferret came to this realization and made to speak, Shizune was already passing by her.

"...What?"

Only a moment ago, there were several meters between them. That meant Shizune had traversed that distance and more in the split second it took for Ferret to remember her face.

Michael, standing beside Ferret, made an apt observation.

"I... I saw her afterimage just now."

And the fact that she had passed them by could only mean—

"Relic!"

By the time Ferret let out a scream, Shizune was grabbing Relic's chin.

"Relic! ...Eek!"

Hilda, who had been clinging to Relic, was pushed aside towards her parents. Shizune held a table knife in her left hand, aimed at Hilda and her parents so she could attack them at any given moment.

"...You understand, right? Try anything funny, and..."

"...Yeah." Relic replied without resisting, looking like he had come to a resolution.

His expression prompted Hilda to try and rush towards Shizune, but her parents held her back.

"Stop! Let go, let go of me, Dad! No! Please, no! Relic! Relic!"

"It's all right. I'll be fine." Relic said, smiling to reassure Hilda. Shizune bowed her head awkwardly.

"Remember when we met in Yokohama? When I approached you on Watt's orders? Back then, you reminded me so much of my brother I couldn't stand it. He would have been just about your age if he were still alive. That's why I gave up on hunting you. For a vampire, you looked too innocent. You didn't look like one of those monsters."

She put on a sad smile, then withdrew it again.

"But today you showed me power. Right before my eyes. I saw the monstrous power of Relic von Waldstein. I'd never seen anything like it."

The range of emotions in her eyes diminished rapidly, being replaced by childlike curiosity. It was as though they were being overridden by her desire for Relic's power and flavor.

"It's all right. Just let me drink your blood, and I'll let your sister live for now. And I still have my promise with the viscount, too."

With a wry grin, Shizune repeated what Relic said to her that day one month ago, after talking about his family.

"Don't worry. I'll be gentle."

A second later, there was a flash of silver by Relic's neck. His throat was torn. Blood began spewing out.

Hilda and Ferret screamed, but the knife Shizune was holding would not let them approach. Even the look in Relic's eyes and the gestures he was trying to make with his hands was trying to keep them away.

Shizune sucked the blood from his neck like a vampire. It was a fearful sight that almost had an air of sensuality. And it looked as though no one could stop Shizune now.

But at that very moment, they were rescued by an unexpected group of heroes.

Suddenly, a door leading in from a room on the lower floor opened. A group of what looked to be tourists crowded into the ballroom.

The roughened man at the head of the group wore an army jacket.

He glanced over at the second level of the ballroom.

"Wait... wait a sec."

The people who had walked in on the situation was Cargilla and the other exterminators, who had been hired to kill the viscount.

Seeing the strange spectacle before him, Shizune at the centre of it all, he vacantly spoke up.

"What the hell's going on here?"

Shizune slowly drew her face back from Relic, and wiped the blood from her mouth with her sleeve.

Relic's bleeding had already stopped. It did not seem like he had been badly hurt.

Turning her eyes from him for a moment, Shizune looked down at Cargilla and the others with a bored expression.

"...You're finally awake. You know, the *civilian* couple here regained consciousness earlier than you."

The exterminators looked at one another, their complexions much healthier than when the jester was subjugating them. As none of them could speak Japanese, they had no idea what Shizune was saying to them.

Shizune chose her words carefully, explaining in what little English she knew.

"I'm exterminating a vampire."

"Hey, hey. You sayin' that kid's a vampire? And what's with these red icicles?"

As the exterminators looked at Shizune dubiously, they climbed up to the second level one by one.

"...? What? Don't bother me."

Something was going wrong. Why were they all armed, and why were they ignoring Ferret and the others, instead coming straight for her?

But from their complexion, they did not seem to be under subjugation, Shizune thought. But this conclusion was mistaken, to her detriment.

"Well, we just couldn't leave you, Missy."

"...?"

"See, we're still under subjugation. Hahaha!"

At that very moment, every single exterminator spewed blood from their mouths.

"?!"

At the same time, the viscount's fading presence again filled the ballroom.

The blood that had burst from the exterminators billowed upwards like smoke, creating very clear letters of blood before the shocked Shizune.

[Let us not be too hasty, Miss Shizune. Now, let us deal with matters as gentlemen once more!]

'How did this happen?!'

Shizune glanced over at the first level without even thinking. The frozen lump of blood was still where it was before, reaching into the air.

[Ah, a true gentleman never forgets to keep his weapons in reserve!]

"How...?!"

[Ah, well, to be frank, I was somewhat bothered by something earlier. The second time you asked to meet my children, you specifically asked for my son and daughter. Why, I had never specified that they were brother and sister, so how could you know such a thing in the first place, I wondered!]

Shizune shook her head, acknowledging her mistake.

"I did regret putting it that way a second later..." She began, but trailed off. Her breathing felt strange. It as as though something other than air was filling in her lungs—something terribly dangerous—

"Urgh?!"

The collapse began.

Her breathing became labored as something wrenched at her lungs, like they were filling with water. She was literally on the verge of drowning, though she was standing in a ballroom in a castle on the mountains.

The discomfort gave way to pain, and the more she tried to breathe the further she fell closer to death.

"...Gah!"

Shizune desperately bent her body forward and struck her own ribcage. With a loud cough, she spat out red fluid.

"Hah... ah... You... you can do something like this, too?" Shizune glared at the viscount, who tilted his form sideways as though he was playing dumb.

[Ah, though it is certainly within my power to do so, I'm afraid that is not part of my body.]

"...What?"

Shizune frowned. The red liquid she had spewed out suddenly grew hazy, then melted into the air.

"?!"

When she turned around, she came face-to-face with a light patch of fog. She suddenly sensed the presence of another vampire.

At that moment, she was enveloped by a colorful mist.

The fog was the same colour as the jester's costume.

"...!"

Before Shizune could put two and two together, the fog began to gather at her mouth.

Realizing what was happening, Shizune hurriedly turned her gaze to Watt's collapsed form. The triangular hat she had tossed to the floor had disappeared.

Seeing the exterminators, their pale complexions restored, Shizune figured out the identity of the being enveloping her.

She backed off, getting away from the fog, and yelled at the viscount.

"I thought you said you killed her!"

The viscount's body shook as he answered Shizune in an unnecessarily upfront font.

[I do not recall ever claiming to have killed the girl dressed as a clown.]

The ballroom was filled with the jester's fog.

The air itself, filled with a light haze, was brimming with silent fury at Shizune.

The jester was not the only one filling the hall now.

The viscount spread his body over the floor and the walls, spreading himself through the ballroom at incredible speeds. Red spouts of blood traveled from wall to wall, covering the room like a giant net.

The ballroom was tinted red now, as though the blood had been put up there from the very beginning as ornamentation. Even a freezing fork like the one Shizune had thrown earlier would do little to harm the viscount now.

As the fog spread through the ballroom, Shizune began to sense the viscount and the jester from every direction around her. She was now open to surprise attacks.

"Ugh..."

Realizing that the tides were turning, Shizune turned in order to take Relic hostage.

He was indeed a powerful vampire, but he was still possessed of many weaknesses. If Shizune could use his immaturity to her advantage, she could easily use him as a bargaining chip, she thought.

But Cargilla and the others, under the jester's subjugation, stepped between her and Relic one by one.

"Move!"

Shizune ruthlessly threw aside the exterminators, without using any weapons. She did not consider them allies—only unfortunate pawns who happened to get wrapped up in Watt's peculiar hobby. They had looked down upon her for being an Eater, without realizing their own hypocrisy. And since Shizune had no interest in them to begin with, she did not even try to remember their names, much less their faces.

And so she was caught off guard.

She could never have known the fact that the exterminators, minus Val the newbie, had been joined by one more person.

Shizune kicked and shoved the exterminators aside. There was only one person left standing between her and Relic.

She swung out her arm at superhuman speed, aiming to strike the man in the neck.

But the man suddenly crossed his arms before his face, parrying Shizune's attack.

"?!"

Though he was almost too late, the man had withstood Shizune's superhuman strength. Shizune then sensed a vampiric presence from the man. But he was not a human being under subjugation—he himself was a vampire.

The fog and the blood filling the room had dulled her senses, preventing her from noticing the vampire until it was too late.

She hurriedly swung up her other arm and made to drive a knife into the man's heart.

"One, two, three."

With those quiet words, the man's vampiric presence ballooned exponentially. At the same time, white bats began flying out of his mouth, ramming themselves into Shizune's face.

"What?!"

Pain shot up from her left arm.

Shizune's hand, clutching the knife, was caught in a set of wolf teeth that had emerged from the man's chest.

"Ugh!"

Shizune grimaced. The man laughed.

"It worked! This was the first time I combined transformation with magic tricks, you see." The bespectacled man said in perfect Japanese. Putting pressure into the jaws he had transformed part of his body into, he tore off Shizune's left hand with ease.

"Ah...!"

Most people would have screamed, but Shizune held back that urge with determination alone. Watching her curiously, the Magic Man excitedly got into character.

"Oh, hello there! I've heard so much about you, but this is the first time we meet face-to-face. You really are quite powerful. I never would've been able to beat you without causing a little distraction."

'What's going on?!'

Shizune was lost in confusion. She had hunted vampires for years now, but nothing like this had ever happened before.

She had in the past devoured countless enemies, much more powerful than this man, the viscount, and the fog she assumed to be the jester.

Too many things were taking her by surprise.

Until now, she based her strategies on Watt's information. She had built up experience through countless battles she had anticipated to a certain extent, but she did not have the skills to craft strategies on the fly.

'Why is this happening? I just drank Relic's blood; I should be moving much faster. I should be able to fight off those teeth easily!'

She realized that her powers were not greatly enhanced after drinking Relic's blood. Relic, a vampire with power enough to synchronize with an entire island.

"Ugh!"

Bracing herself, Shizune forcibly pulled back her arm from the Magic Man.

"Oh, that's not good!" The Magic Man cried, but Shizune drew back her right arm in a single try.

Her flesh tore between the wolf teeth with a revolting noise.

Even still, she ran as fast as she could for a spot where the fog was still lightest. She could feel warm blood dripping from her left arm, but she had to get away.

The fog was faintest in the vicinity of Watt's corpse, so she would catch her breath there—

That was when she came to a realization.

'Watt's... corpse? A vampire's corpse? Wouldn't he have turned to ash? Is it because he's a dhampyr, or...!'

Her mind was not as quick as her body.

By the time she sensed a faint presence from the fallen Watt, it was too late. She was already up close to him.

Watt's presence surged rapidly.

There was an impact.

Shizune's body came to a very sudden stop, as though she had hit an invisible wall.

Watt had gotten up without warning, springing forward like a jack-in-the-box.

His hand had driven itself into her stomach. Watt himself hadn't moved, but Shizune had been moving so fast that she had essentially rammed herself into his attack.

"...That hurt, you bitch..." Watt spat.

With that, he opened his hand inside Shizune's stomach and grasped her innards.

"Gah... agh..."

Shizune fell limply to the floor, coughing up blood and unable to even scream.

'How...? I know I stabbed through his heart...'

As her consciousness faded, she realized that a dark shadow was darting towards Watt.

It was a large bat with human eyes that had been hanging from the ceiling. Diving down towards Watt's chest, it disappeared into the hole she had created earlier.

It was a bizarre sight, but Shizune now understood what had happened.

"Shit, and I was saving this trick for the count, too." Watt sighed. Shizune glared at him, her eyes trembling in shock.

'...He separated just his heart?! Impossible! Not even Melhilm—'

The moment before she lost consciousness, Shizune heard him answer her unspoken question.

"...'Cause I'm half human. Didn't you know, Eater? With enough effort, humans can evolve infinitely."

"Well, now..."

Watt picked up his sunglasses off the floor, put them on, and quietly surveyed his surroundings.

[Allow me to say, I believe you've mixed up the definitions of 'growth' and 'evolution'.]

The letters of blood floated up to him before he even asked. It was very difficult to read properly because of the red stains all over the walls.

[Evolution is not growth, nor is the reverse true. How could you fail to make such a simple distinction?]

"'Cause I'm an idiot." Watt replied half-heartedly.

[Certainly not. How could you not understand? You have not evolved—you are *growing* of your own strength. Step by step. Little by little. Slowly but surely.]

Watt laughed mockingly.

"You tryin' to lecture me like some know-it-all old man again?"

[Not at all. I am merely happy to see someone I've known for years grow more mature. Whether physically or mentally.]

"That's what I mean by 'know-it-all old man'."

Watt brought his bloodied hand up to his lips and slowly licked off the blood—Shizune's blood, the blood that should have received Relic's power.

If what he said earlier was true, he should now have Relic's power at his disposal.

Ferret gasped without thinking, but the viscount did not so much as twitch.

Silence.

Each individual, holding their own thoughts and hypotheses, watched as time passed.

Watt stood still for a moment, observing the effects of the blood.

"...I knew it." He said, gritting his teeth and nodding at Relic.

"You're not Relic, are you?"

[Correct. You are no fool, Watt. In fact, I would go so far as to claim that you are an intelligent man!]

"As if I needed a compliment from you, Count."

Watt shook his head weakly and continued, looking like he had figured out everything.

"...Val, right?"

The being that had been in Relic's form until now began to change. He transformed into the newbie exterminator and greeted Watt. Everyone but Watt and the viscount was taken by surprise—Hilda and Ferret found themselves gaping, astonished.

"Then the real Relic must have been watching everything from the shadows all this time. After house-training that Magic Man instead of killing him." Watt spat, but the Magic Man had disappeared. It seemed he had escaped the ballroom as soon as he confirmed that Watt was conscious again.

And—

"Oy. Clown." Watt said, looking at no direction in particular. But there was no response.

"Come on out. I'm not mad at you."

Still no response. He waited for a few moments, but finally relented and flashed his fangs at the viscount with a bitter grin.

"Never mind. So, let's continue, Count."

[...If only you would pour this much passion into improving our city's industry...]

"Shaddap. I feel like shit. So this is what you mean by paying me back in triple? And here I was, thinking Shizune was the only traitor working for me. And now it turns out there's three times as many backstabbers around here."

Watt's voice had become surprisingly cold after his revival.

"Don't you ever get tired of this, Count? Spoiling my plans left and right? You're always one step ahead of me. Even now. You turned three of my flunkies against me, and I bet you already knew Shizune was going to betray me when you set up this trap, didn't you? So what, you sayin' you're omniscient or something?"

He took a step forward.

"But listen up, Count. Who the fuck do you think you are? Look at yourself. You lost your chance at death, your human form, and you still call yourself a gentleman? Is it some policy of yours to live, even if it means paying with your dignity?"

The viscount was unfazed by Watt's provocation.

[I am indeed a coward, make no mistake. But I have no need for unwarranted power. As long as I have what it takes to protect those dear to me, I shall be satisfied. As you said, I have abandoned both human form and my body as a vampire. But this is the result of my own choices and actions. I have no regrets.]

"Sounds like you're bluffing to me."

Watt shook his head. There was an air of bloodlust gathering around him.

"Then try me. Unlike you, I still haven't given up on power. So just *try* and protect your loved ones. You think that body of yours, without bones or meat, can stop me from getting to them?!"

Watt began raising his voice, his eyes glinting. But physically, he was less than whole. Blood was still flowing from his knife wound.

[I ask that you stop this. Your heart may be unscathed, but as you have been stabbed through the chest with silver, you must have been badly injured—both as a human and as a vampire.] The viscount said worriedly, but Watt angrily knocked him away. The letters scattered for a moment, then reformed.

Not even concerned with his wound, Watt sighed anxiously.

"...You won't even let me finish things properly?"

Sensing the hostility in Watt, the viscount paused.

[...Make no mistake, I can see your sincere resolve and determination. But it is true that all good battles come to an end in the blink of an eye.]

"Enough of your cheek, Count!"

[Then if you will allow me.]

Watt laughed loudly at the viscount's response. It was clear from his expression that he would pour everything he had into the duel.

However—

"Hah... That's more like it—ARGH!"

As soon as the duel was scheduled, it was over.

A part of the viscount's net-like body had twisted onto Watt's leg.

But for some reason, it was enough to send Watt flying. He began trembling where he lay, as though he had been electrocuted.

Or, to be specific, that was exactly what had happened to him.

The other end of the stream of blood that was curled around him was plugged into the electrical socket for the chandelier.

[I am resistant to electricity, as I explained to Miss Shizune many times.] The viscount said apologetically. But Watt had no time or strength to spare for reading.

"-----!"

Desperately swallowing a scream, he struggled to suppress the shock running through his body. The electricity flowed through him with his blood as a conduit.

It must have been a powerful blow to Watt, who had already been weakened, but he stood his ground and shot the viscount a demonic glare.

The viscount, having remembered something, sent part of his body down the stairs.

His target was the two meter-tall pillars of ice standing in the middle of the ballroom. He twisted himself around his own frozen body.

Transferring energy from the webs he had spun around the ballroom into the icicles, he tried to move his frozen body.

Just as the fresh stream of blood he had extended began to freeze over, a 30-centimeter long piece of the icicle broke off cleanly with a metallic noise.

The tip of the icicle was frozen at a sharp point. It looked almost like a bloodstained wooden stake that had been used to kill many vampires in the past.

Controlling the icicle as though operating a remote-controlled toy, the viscount levitated it before Watt, who was still struggling to fight the electric current. The viscount's body, separated from the fork that had turned him into ice, would no longer be affected by the fork.

The sharpened tip was pointing directly at Watt's heart. It floated before him, as though announcing an execution.

Although Watt could see all of that happening in the midst of his pain, he could not transform any part of himself into bats because of the agony.

"-----!"

And yet he refused to fall. He did not try to run. If he fell now, the viscount would not go so far as to strike him. Even so, Watt would not go down—because he knew that about the viscount.

Without a word, the viscount launched the frozen part of his body at Watt's heart.

Watt raised a leg to kick away the projectile, but the electric current would not let him move as he wished. The icicle narrowly missed his foot and continued on to his heart.

The glinting red icicle flew towards him—

And stopped in place a hair's breadth from his chest.

[Checkmate.] The viscount announced, pulling back the icicle.

At the same time, he unplugged himself from the outlet, releasing Watt from the electric shock.

Watt knelt against the railings, breathing heavily. He glared at the viscount. He had no choice but to take a moment to catch his breath, but once he had regained some of his strength, he cried at the viscount with an even more terrifying look.

"'Checkmate'? Quit fucking around!"

[I shall spare your life, so I ask that you later apologize to those who were involved in this incident.]

The letters collapsed. The splotches of blood in the ballroom trembled, then returned to one point. The walls, regaining their white coat of paint, looked as though they were speaking for the viscount's desire to end things now.

But Watt's anger grew even fiercer.

"You... you think that's it?! You think that's enough to make me give up?! Something this fucking insignificant?! And not just me. You think those bastards over there are gonna stand for you letting me off the hook?!"

[That is why I ask that you apologize to them. Please, I must also ask that you pay attention to what people write.]

Watt ignored the viscount and shouted, baring his fangs.

"Yeah, that's how you always were, Count! Always acting so high-and-mighty, deciding how things end on your terms! But don't think things'll always go your way!"

Whipping aside his sunglasses, Watt glared at the viscount with his eyes no longer hidden.

"So that's it. The villain begs for mercy, and shoots the hero in the back when he turns around! But our oh-so-great hero never lets himself get shot. Which means he never trusted the villain in the first place. That's the kind of bastard I hate the most! The villains, too. If you know you can't beat him, don't fucking fight him in the first place!"

Watt stumbled as he got to his feet.

"But I'm different. I'd never beg for my life! I did this because I knew I could win. Small fry like me has to turn the situation to my favor before doing anything! And if I still lose, that just means I'm a fucking idiot! I don't regret anything!" He roared angrily, but his eyes were honest and full of resolve.

"That's why... Let me tell you, Count! That's right. The moment you turn your back on me, I *will* shoot you. I'll warn you before any hero tries to forgive me! I'll say it from the very start! So are you still going to turn your back on me?! Are you still going to forgive me?!"

For a time, the only sound echoing through the hall was Watt's ragged breathing.

[I knew you would say that, O most noble of petty villains.]

The viscount again laid out words of blood in the air.

[You are indeed a petty villain, but you would never beg for your life or stoop to licking another's shoes. In that sense, I would go so far as to say that I respect that about you.]

The viscount then took aim with the icicle.

[Well, now. In order to show you my deepest respect, I shall grant unto you a defeat most conclusive!]

With that, he again launched the icicle. It sped toward Watt even faster than before, like a red bullet—a red stake poised to pierce his heart.

Watt tried to raise his leg to kick it aside, but the effects of the electric shock left him unable to do little more than stand.

Realizing this, he shut his eyes for a moment. He then opened them with determination.

"Heh."

Glaring at the approaching stake, he chuckled self-deprecatingly, waiting for the end.

At that moment, a patch of fog appeared.

A girl was standing before him—a still-childlike girl wearing clownish makeup.

Her shoulders were trembling, but she had materialized fully—and she was holding the tip of the icicle.

The icicle had stopped just short of reaching her chest.

Confirming that it had indeed come to a stop, the jester angrily yelled at the viscount.



"Viscount, you promised! You said you'd save Master Watt if I did what you told me to! You said you wouldn't kill him! You said you wouldn't get rid of him! That's enough now, right? This is enough! So please! Please don't kill Master Watt!"

"——"

Watt was stunned into silence.

[What do you say, Watt? Is this not a most conclusive defeat?] The viscount said. He then added:

[Allow me to ask the self-proclaimed villain, then. Would you shoot the hero, even if it meant shooting through the poor clown? A true hero would not go easy on such a villain in the first place. After all, if she had died as a result of my misjudgment, would that not disqualify me from hero status? ...Although I must admit that I am still quite fearful of the possibility that you will bring the girl to harm for this later.]

Watt did not even finish reading—instead, he went and lifted Shizune onto his shoulder.

[Hm? What do you intend to do with her?]

"What do you care? ...Even an Eater won't survive without medical treatment."

[I intended to provide treatment for her myself, but if you are volunteering for the role...]

Watt thought for a moment, and laughed.

It was a vulgar laughter that would not have been out of place from a third-rate villain. Narrowing his eyes under his sunglasses, he slowly came back to himself.

"Oi, Count. I bet you thought I was betrayed, right? You thought she used me to her heart's content and backstabbed me as soon as she got the chance, right?"

Standing up straight, with the bloodied girl on his shoulder, he laughed defiantly at the entire world.

"As if, you idiot! *I'm* the one who used her! I knew it all from the start! Of course I knew everything! Everything, even the fact that she was trying to kill me!"

[Even the fact that I would spare the young clown?]

Watt's face twisted into a smile.

"I trust you, Count."

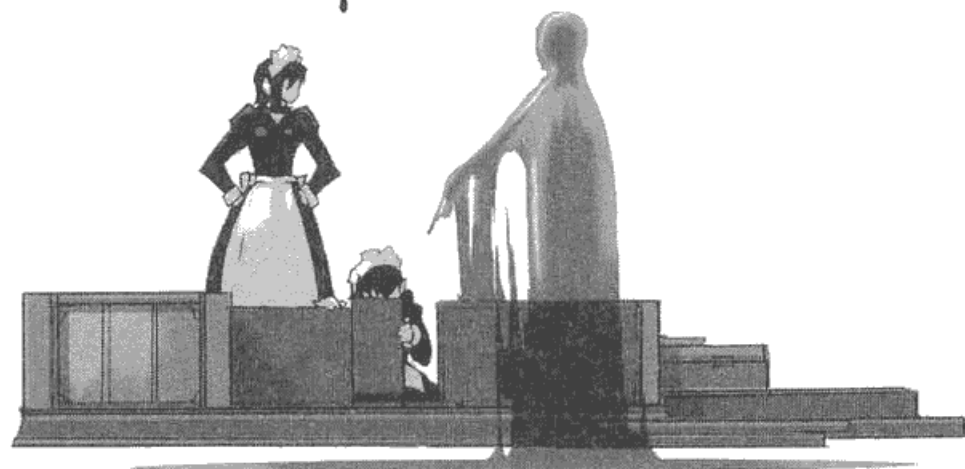
Without even looking back, he left through the ballroom doors.

"You wouldn't kill a kid. You would never."

The viscount sent him off, writing out words that Watt could not possibly see.

[I am a *viscount*, young mayor.]

エピソード 棺の中の十人十色



Epilogue: Ten Characters/Ten Colors in the Coffin

Just when I thought I was going to disappear, the viscount spoke to me.

[Have you any intention of cooperating, young lady?]

No. I'm working for Master Watt. I couldn't betray him.

[Is your loyalty your way of life? Or perhaps something you reserve only for him?]

I don't know what you're trying to say. I just want to see Master Watt smiling. I want to see him smile again and again and again. So I want him to live for a long time.

[Then might I suggest that you devote your energy to working for me, so that you have the opportunity to ask for the lengthening of his life?]

...If I ask, are you going to save Master Watt? Even from that girl?

[So long as my faithful subordinate's request does entail my breaking my own sense of morality, I intend to oblige her request.]

I thought for a second. If I disappeared, I wouldn't be able to help Master Watt.

I didn't know if I could trust this person, but maybe I could still be of use to Master Watt, even if this vampire betrayed me. I'm weak and useless, but even I might be able to do something as long as I'm still alive.

I might be able to see his smile again.

And that's why I betrayed Master Watt.

The wide street leading from the castle to the city was lit by street lamps, peaceful as it should be in the dead of night.

"I told you not to follow me, Clown! Take one more step, and I'll pretend you don't exist for as long as I live." Watt roared, stopping suddenly. Shizune was still slung over his shoulder.

'Oh no, he's mad.'

The jester had tried to follow Watt in fog form, but he had noticed her presence. She took physical form and nervously hung her head. Watt did not turn to look at her.

"I'm feeling good. You understand?"

The jester tilted her head. This was not like Watt.

"I tasted hell because you bastards betrayed me. And I know that popularity is something you *earn* for yourself. None of you are gonna sympathize with me."

The jester tried to deny it, but Watt did not let her interrupt.

"But listen up, Clown. I know better than anyone how damn good it feels to crawl up to the top. That's right. I'll start all over again from the pits. I'll enjoy every step I take, and one day I'll reach the top and push off everyone else. That's what I'm living for."

Watt's voice grew more passionate. The jester thought that she could see his usual vulgar grin beyond his shoulder.

"So don't even *think* about taking that fun away from me, Clown! I was the idiot for leaving shit to other people this time. But I'll start crawling up again, with my own strength. Again and again, as long as it takes! So listen up. ...I *will* get you back. You, the Magic Man, the transforming bastard, those powers... Everything! I'll take it all back with my own two hands! What could be better than that?"

He stopped, then turned back to face the jester.

"So you just sit tight and wait, Clown. No... Swear loyalty to the fucking count and do whatever he tells you to do. If he tells you to kill me, you better not show me any mercy! But if that time comes... I will do everything in my power to take you back."

The petty villain rambled on about dreams that were too good for him.

"I'll get it all back one day, all for myself. For me."

On his face was the very same smile the jester had seen so long ago.

"So you better wait for me, Clown."

The jester said nothing—she merely beamed and nodded.

Seeing this, Watt began walking again.

"See you around. Say hi to the count for me."

†

Some time before Watt's attack—

When the transforming vampire fled from the viscount's presence, Michael and Ferret decided to go into the forest to look for him. But they had scarcely stepped into the woods when Val appeared before them.

"...Are you here to finish me off?"

Val was in the form of a young boy, but he looked much more fragile than before, as though he was only a touch away from shattering to bits. Ferret was taken aback by the change in his attitude, but Michael nonchalantly tossed his cell phone to Val.

"Hey, I erased that picture from earlier. Don't worry."

The boy looked at Michael in disbelief.

"Why...?"

"Why? Well, you don't want people to find out who you really are, right? It's gonna be fine. I won't tell a soul."

"But you're human, aren't you? Aren't you scared? Don't I disgust you? Aren't I—"

Michael nodded without hesitation.

"You know, there's this vampire girl I really like. That's why someone being a vampire doesn't scare me. If it did, then that would mean I didn't like Ferret."

"What...?!"

Ferret was stunned by Michael's incredibly fearless confession.

The boy stared at Michael curiously for some time, but finally spoke.

"Thank you."

Then, he transformed into Ferret and gave Michael a kiss on the cheek.

Both Michael and Ferret were left in a daze by this act.

Ferret quickly turned aside and mumbled,

"...I shall not be jealous."

"That must mean that right now, you *are* jealous, and I finally know how you feel about me—oof!"

One well-placed punch was enough to knock Michael unconscious.

It had been nearly a full day since.

Waldstein Castle was enveloped in a lively air.

"...So what in the world was the true form of Valdred?"

"Sorry, that's a secret. Anyway, I'm more curious about this big cargo of yours... Whoa!"

Michael stumbled several times as he carried along a piece of luggage almost as tall as he was. Ferret and the others had only been able to rest after the night of the commotion had passed—and by the time the sun set and they had awakened again, the cargo they had left at the harbor office had been delivered to the castle.

Along with dozens upon dozens of familiars.

"Don't worry, Mr. Mage. I'll get that for you!" Relic called, spotting the bespectacled magician hoisting up his luggage.

"Please, Master Relic! Allow me to do at least this much. After all, this is all a vampire like me is good for! Treat me as one of your familiars, a snake, or an owl!"

"I couldn't do that."

When Relic had unleashed his powers, all he did to the man was toss him into a wolf's jaws to give him a scare. But this was the result. It seemed that the Magician was the type to pledge his loyalty to those stronger than himself, no matter the situation. So long as Relic remained powerful, the Magician would probably remain on his side.

"I dream of the day when you assimilate many organizations under your power, and make me one of your officers, sir! And I'd only be glad to help..."

"...You don't try to hide anything, do you?"

The Magician suddenly stopped, and looked around at the familiars who were assisting Hilda and Michael.

"What a fascinating island."

"Pardon?"

"An area so densely populated by the fantastic... no such place exists in Japan. But it feels as though creatures like us continue to gather on this island one by one. Is there something here, I wonder, that draws us to this place?"

"I don't really know. But I really love this island. I'm sure you'll come to love it too, Mr. Mage."

Although the former Magic Man had treated him so harshly the previous evening, Relic addressed him as though nothing had happened. Understanding that this was Relic's true nature, the Magician closed his eyes.

"I'm already very much in love with this island. And those familiars of yours also seem to be wonderful people."

Relic nodded and looked back at the familiars.

However—

"...Huh? Are there more of them?" Relic asked a nearby maid. She smiled sheepishly.

"That's right, Master Relic. They were trying to hunt us down at the harbor on the mainland, but they ended up coming along with us somehow."

At a glance, Relic could see a group of surprisingly energetic vampires going about their work and having some unusual conversations.

"All right, all right, all right! We're having a welcoming party today, yeah!" "M-A-I-D-S! M-A-I-D-S!" "You know, in Japan, they have a call-in maid service now." "Seriously? Like the ones in Japanimation?" "What, those Japs? Haha!" "J-A-P! J-A-P!"

"Uh... right."

Not only that, working between the werewolves, witches, and maids in green were Cargilla and the other exterminators.

"Huh? Are they still being subjugated?" "Our parents are back to normal, so what happened to these guys?" Hilda and Michael wondered. The jester laughed loudly.

"Tee hee! You know, the viscount said he didn't just want to let them loose and risk getting innocent vampires killed. So he's going to re-educate them! Like a brainwashing session! Ahaha!"

The jester paused for a moment, and addressed Hilda in a more serious tone.

"You know, I found this out when I subjugated your parents. Your mom and dad love you so much. Even more than themselves. It's up to you two if you want to forgive them or not, but I just want you to know, okay?"

"...Okay. Thank you."

"Forgive them? There's nothing to really go that far for!"

Although Hilda still seemed to have mixed feelings about the situation, Michael answered energetically.

"I already expected something like this. I'm in love with a beautiful vampire princess, after all. You don't need to tell me twice that she's too good for me. And to be honest, Ma and Pop not agreeing's nothing compared to maybe getting rejected by Ferret!"

"Tee hee! I bet that princess of your just doesn't have very good taste yet!"

"Young Master Gerhardt. You weren't scared, watching the castle alone for an entire year?" An elderly woman with an arched back asked the viscount with some difficulty.

[Aha! I am no longer a child, Grandmother Job! Each day was filled with adventure!]

"What's this about adventure, now? Haven't you any idea how much I worried that you'd dry up without us? In my eyes, you've still a long way to go, Young Master."

"That's Granny Job."

"What?! But last time I saw her—"

"She gets taller and her back straightens out when she transforms. I don't think it has much to do with age."

Relic and Hilda were talking normally, when Hilda suddenly changed the subject.

"You know, about that Shizune person from yesterday..."

"O-oh, yeah?"

The real Relic had been watching everything from the ballroom roof, hiding his presence. He had attempted to use his powers several times when Hilda was in trouble, but he had been so exhausted that he could not produce even a single bat. Things would have truly ended in disaster without the viscount's intervention.

But there was one other thing bothering Relic—and Hilda had caught hold of the subject.

"She said that you tried to flirt with her or something."

It was a bitter blow. Most vampires had no need to perspire, but Relic's psyche was breaking out into cold sweat at the thought.

"I-it's a hallucination Eaters tend to have. Vampire blood is actually hallucinogenic, you know."

"Ferret told me everything."

"I'm sorry."

Relic decided to come clean and apologize.

His heart was already fracturing, sensing the impending heartbreak. But—

"Is it true you're going to leave on another journey soon?" Hilda asked quietly, never once allowing her smile to fade.

"Huh? Oh, yeah. I think I might go on my own this time, without any of the servants."

"I'll forgive you if you promise to take me along too."

Relic's eyes lit up at the surprising proposal.

"Uh...! Yeah! Definitely!"

As his heart grew warm with joy, Hilda added one condition.

"So you have to decide during the trip whether you'll turn me, subjugate me, or leave me as I am. Okay?"

By the time they had just about finished moving the luggage back into the castle, Relic went to the viscount.

"Father, how can I become like you?"

[Well, first you must inject a special bacteria into your blood]

As the viscount began in a textbook tone, Relic waved his hands in front of his face.

"No, it's not about my body. I wanted to know how I could stay calm all the time like you."

[I must comment that I think myself to be rather hot-blooded, but... Ah, if you wish to become more composed, you must resolve to become a gentleman. Yes, a gentleman. Have pride in yourself, and respect those around you.]

"Can you be a bit more specific?" Relic pressed the viscount, unable to understand.

[It is a simple matter. All you have to do is set up a table, a chair, and a tea set in your heart. Eighty percent of the world's problems would be solved if every human being on earth became like gentlemen. Of course, those who subscribe to certain lines of thinking also choose to enter conflict because of their gentleman status. That is a difficult matter indeed, but a true gentleman must accept all situations at hand and smile. Do you not think so, Relic?]

"I see... Right. I'll do my best." Relic smiled.

Suddenly—

"Master! What is that mess in the ballroom?!"

A maid in green came forward and glared at her master with a look sharp enough to kill.

The viscount trembled, and twisted around to form words of excuse in the blink of an eye.

[I happened to entertain a *miage-nyūdō*⁷ as my guest, but alas, I found myself looking up at him. A most regrettable tragedy.]

"Don't think that lies will work on us, Master!"

[Zzz...]

"And please don't fall asleep!"

[Now, now. Do not worry over such tiny details. >____<]

"Please don't use emoticons like that, Master. It's disturbing! You always get yourself into so much trouble, even though you're the *weakest* of anyone in this castle! Just like the time you watched a movie and signed up for an internet correspondence course on 'dual gun karate', even though you can't even hold a gun! This is precisely why a parasite like Watt was able to become mayor..."

As he listened to the maid's lecture, the viscount quietly formed a smaller set of words for Relic to read.

[I understand that you are concerned about Hilda. Relic, if you truly love her, then you must continue to contemplate what you will do with your resolve. After all, further thought will only strengthen your determination.]

"Oh..."

[And once you have arrived at your answer, you must see your choice through to the end. Even should your desires refuse to walk down that path.]

Neither denying nor accepting Relic's urges as a vampire, the letters of blood continued as though smiling.

[After all, resolve that continues growing for eternity will never lose out to base instincts.]

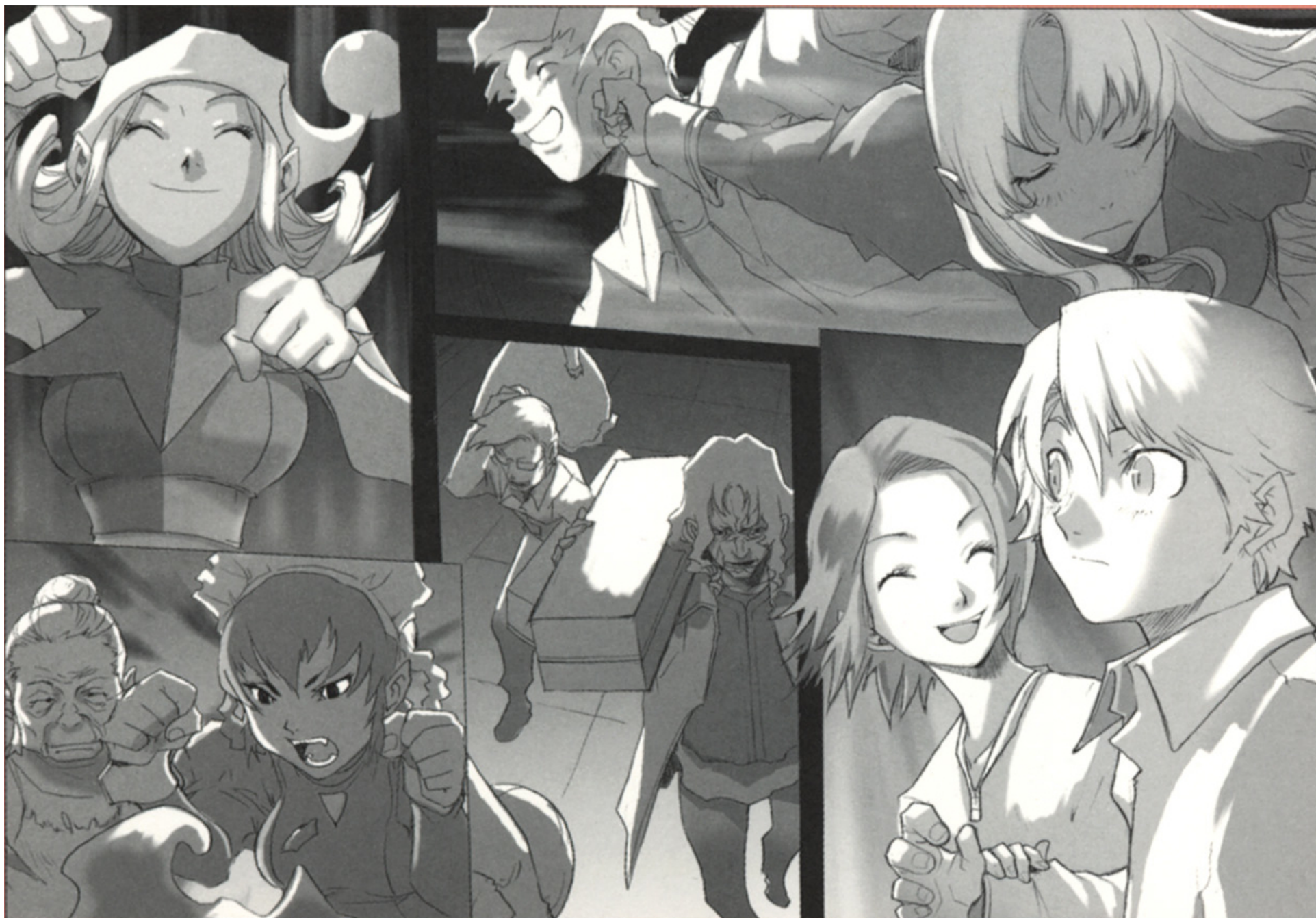
⁷ A Japanese yōkai that gets taller the more one looks up at it.

Let me tell you about my family.

Recently, our family's gotten bigger. Other than Father or Ferret, there's Hilda and Michael. A girl who looks like a clown, someone who can transform into anything—human or vampire—and a magician who acts a bit like a bad guy. And so many others. I feel like I was able to let go of so many worries in these past few days. But I still have a long way to go if I want to be like Father.

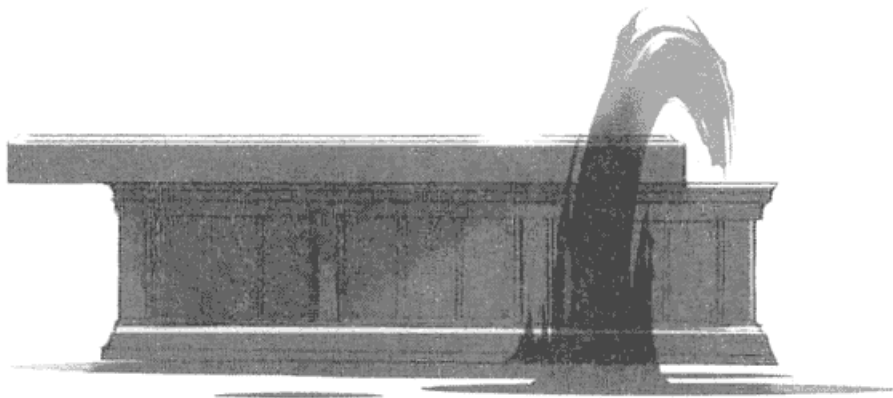
To Father, this entire city is his family. Even the monstrous vampires living in the forest, and people like Watt. Maybe he considers everyone he's ever met his kin. It might sound kind of foolish, but it's because he sticks to his own foolishness that I respect Father so much. That's why I think his body—that pool of blood—is a perfect fit for him. Warm and free, able to take on any shape he wants.

Yeah. I know that I can't just follow after Father's back. One day, I'm going to overtake it—although seeing as I can't even figure out where his back is, I feel like I have a tough journey ahead of me.



余章

棺の街の市長



Epilogue-Within-An-Epilogue: The Mayor of the City of the Coffin

When Shizune Kijima opened her eyes, she could see Watt nearby, not wearing his sunglasses. A bright light shone through the windows. She guessed that she was probably in a hospital.

"Ah, so you're finally awake. Good thing you opened your eyes just when I came to visit."

Watt laughed, his tone completely different from what he used when he wore his sunglasses. His smile was not at all vulgar—in fact, it was refreshing. But something about it looked slightly forced. Shizune then remembered what had happened before she awoke.

"You...!"

She tried to sit up, but her body wouldn't move so easily.

"Even an Eater will be out of shape after a whole week unconscious in the hospital. It's a miracle you're still alive after losing all that blood. I guess that's an Eater for you, don't you agree?"

"...Why are you talking like that?"

"Because I'm supposed to be the mayor. Did you assume I would spout profanities at City Hall every day?"

Shizune remained cautious, observing Watt. He did not seem to be taking a hostile stance, but she could not see an opening to attack. Not only that, she had no idea why he had opted to bring her here after what she had done to him.

"...I thought you hated putting on an act like this."

Although Shizune had known Watt for a long time, she had never seen him with this kind of an expression before. She was angry at herself for thinking that they had a bond of trust. She regretting saying, "Thanks for the meal".

"You know, I hate losing."

"What's that supposed to mean?"

"I hated being shown up by Viscount Gerhardt von Waldstein, the Lord of Growerth. So I decided to rule over the city on the official stage. Simple."

Watt's tone, almost childlike in a way, left Shizune uneasy. Was he truly the same man from before?

"And once I became mayor, I realized I didn't want to lose to the criminals. I didn't want to lose to the bad economy. I didn't want to lose to the three other cities on this island. And eventually, it came to this—I can't stop now, even if I wanted to."

"...Why are you telling me all this?"

Before answering, Watt gathered his things and prepared to leave.

"I just wanted you to know how much I hate losing."

The mayor looked out at the streets and smiled, as though treasuring the tranquility outside.

"The count and I are pulling a lot of strings behind the scenes at this hospital. Talk to the doctor and he'll get you everything you need."

"What do you mean?"

"You know, like *blood packs*."

Shizune had no idea what Watt was trying to say. But what he said next confirmed her worst suspicions.

"Looks like you're the type that's immune to sunlight. Congratulations."

"...? ...?! No... It can't be..."

Realizing something, Shizune looked down at her own body. Her left hand, torn away by the Magic Man, was whole. She could not feel anything of the terrible wound that should have been on her abdomen. Not only that, despite her sluggishness, she could not feel any sort of pain from her injuries.

"You... you didn't...!"

Watching Shizune's face grow dark with despair, Watt flashed her a satisfied grin. It was not the faked smile of the mayor, but a truly petty, villainous smirk.

"I told you. I hate losing."

"No... No!"

Shizune reached up to her neck, and discovered two little puncture marks.

"Getting betrayed all the time really is no fun. So let me just tell you exactly what you told me then."

Looking at Shizune's hopeless expression, Watt bowed politely.

"Kijima Shizune. Thank you for the meal."

"In fact, seeing as I've freed you from the cursed life of an Eater, I almost feel I deserve your gratitude."

Returning to his role of mayor, Watt addressed the trembling Shizune. But Shizune's reply was filled with the kind of bitterness that few sixteen-year-olds were capable of.

"Unforgivable..."

Shizune had no idea what this change meant for her. Perhaps Watt was right, and he had freed her from her cursed fate. Or perhaps he had thrown her into a new sort of hell altogether.

But right now, she needed a reason to live.

Having had her entire life denied, Shizune desperately struggled to find meaning to her existence. Anything was fine. Any goal would be fine, as long as she could continue being herself. Even if it meant destroying everything but herself.

And so, she swore revenge against the man standing before her. She swore to avenge her life upon him—that was her goal. Though she had once lost sight of revenge during her time as an Eater, she had returned to her original purpose once more.

It was an almost tragically foolish situation. Even Shizune herself understood that, but her resentment was infinitely greater than any shame she might have felt.

"I will never forgive you."

"You're welcome."

"I'm not going to kill you... I will destroy—these streets—this island. Your city. I will stop at nothing... This island's happiness... Brace yourself."

Perhaps Watt was imagining things, but he thought he saw something like a smile on Shizune's face when she uttered her final statement. But he did not try to confirm his suspicion—the mayor was no longer looking at Shizune.

Listening to the resentful words aimed at him, Watt headed for the door, his footsteps silent.

"In that case, I will also do my best. I will stop at nothing—I will use every underhanded means and every trick in the book to retain my position, and protect this city from you. After all, that is my role as mayor."

Without even looking back at Shizune, he declared his resolve to her calmly.

"I am the mayor. If anyone but myself decides to bring harm to this place, he or she will have to answer to me."

Opening the door wide, Watt put on his sunglasses and repeated himself—

"Cause I hate losing."

-Vamp! End?-

「俺は
負けず嫌いだからな」



Afterword

Hello, it's been a while! Or, nice to meet you. This is Narita.

Thank you for reading Vamp!

There's a long story behind the title of this book. The editor-in-chief originally suggested 'Vamp Heaven', but it was shot down because there's already a comic of the same name. So they took my suggestions into consideration and created this title.

My suggestions were 'Blood?!' 'It's Blood!', 'Bloodfoam~!', and 'Vracula!'. Actually, it feels like they weren't considered at all. Probably just my imagination.

Incidentally, I asked a certain *Bokusatsu* author, who said, "How about something like 'Vamvamvam!' or 'Sluuuurp!?'". It looks like the exclamation mark is a given for all my works.

...After writing for Dengeki, maybe I've started to go in the wrong direction.

*Heavy spoilers follow after this point.

This time, we have a vampire story. It's a very mainstream genre. It's a very popular genre. It always creates a stir.

'Damn it, Narita's finally been blinded with greed', you might think, but that is a misunderstanding! Ever since my first work, *Baccano!*, I've always been aiming for a popular, mainstream work! ...But it's not like anyone's going to believe me, and to be honest I'm not really confident in that claim myself, so never mind. To be more honest, I've only ever written things I've wanted to write. And this story was another one of them. I'm personally a big fan of *manzai*⁸, so I think I'm always itching to use characters who'd normally be relegated to the sidelines as main characters. The main character of this work, in fact—if I said any more, the publisher and the bookstores would come after me with stakes to stop me from lowering sales, so I'll stop here.

In any case, this is a vampire story. But when I came up with the plot, there was already a vampire series in Dengeki called *Kyūketsuki no Oshigoto* (by Suzu Suzuki). I read up to volume 6 and learned from the afterword that volume 7 was the end. And I heard news that Suzuki-san was putting out a book in March. Then I could write my story for May and it'll be perfect! I decided, and made up my mind to write two months in a row following *Durarara!!*. But—

"Hm? No, the March release is a new work." Suzuki-san told me in person, and my plans fell apart on the spot. As I floundered in panic, the editor-in-chief Suzuki and Wada-san told me, "Ah, don't worry. No reader would think your works are in the same genre as *Kyūketsuki no Oshigoto*". I didn't know whether to laugh or cry.

⁸ A style of Japanese comedy where two participants (a straight man and a funny man) exchange jokes at great speed.

Me: "...But it's still a vampire story. Ueo-san's *Akuma no Mikata* just entered a vampire arc, too, so I'm not sure if someone like me should butt in—"

Wada-san: "No, no, no, no, no. It still doesn't overlap with your *modus operandi*."

Me: "M-modus operandi?!"

Editor-in-chief: "But before that... is this... really a vampire story?"

And so, my worries were eased and I managed to release the book.

I love vampire fiction, so I do everything from watch movies to read comics and novels. So sometimes I'm afraid that my stories will overlap with other people's works.

I guess you could call the vampire genre deep—you can keep digging and never hit the ground. There's something delicate about it in the way it hazily borders other genres. And if you just take the characteristic of sucking blood, I'm sure you could dig up a mountainload of vampire legends from all around the world.

The image conjured by the word 'vampire' these days was largely set in stone by cinema. But that just might mean that films have the power to so effortlessly engrave the image of vampires into people's minds. I'd like to work hard so that I could create such incredible works one day. First, I should improve my writing... it's starting to feel like I've got a long road ahead of me.

And to everyone who's wondering why Val's identity remained a mystery—his true form is shown in great detail somewhere in this book. Val or the mayor might be the main character for the next book, but whether the next book happens or not depends on how well this book sells.

*As usual, below are words of thanks.

Thank you to editor-in-chief Suzuki-san and Wada-san(Papio) from the editorial department.

Thank you to the proofreaders and the designers who work on the book. And to everyone at Media Works—the marketing department, the publishing department, and the managerial department.

Thank you to my family, friends, and acquaintances, to whom I am always indebted in many ways. Especially everyone living in the city of S.

Thank you to the Dengeki writers and illustrators, to whom I owe very much. And to Mikami En-san, who gave me a great deal of information regarding a certain part of this work.

Thank you to Enami Katsumi-san(who's gone independent as an illustrator this year—I'm rooting for you!), for creating such wonderful character designs during his busy schedule, even in spite of my vague and unusual descriptions.

And thank you to you, who are reading this fourth and odd series of mine.

I'd like to express my utmost gratitude to everyone above—thank you.

March 2004, at home.
With lips trembling from watching Sasaki Hirohisa's *Chi o Sū Uchū*
Narita Ryohgo



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